Cash is HOT and safety is NOT

by Captain
Rob van Eekeren

After a serious safe-runway operations incident, the Dutch transport safety board concluded: *"Pilots and air traffic controllers are aware of the risks involved in taxiway take-off and will always try to avoid these. However, they also endeavour to operate as efficiently as possible. The procedure of offering and accepting a shorter route is part of such operational practice. The parties involved must weigh up the options and should obviously never sacrifice safety in an effort to be punctual."*

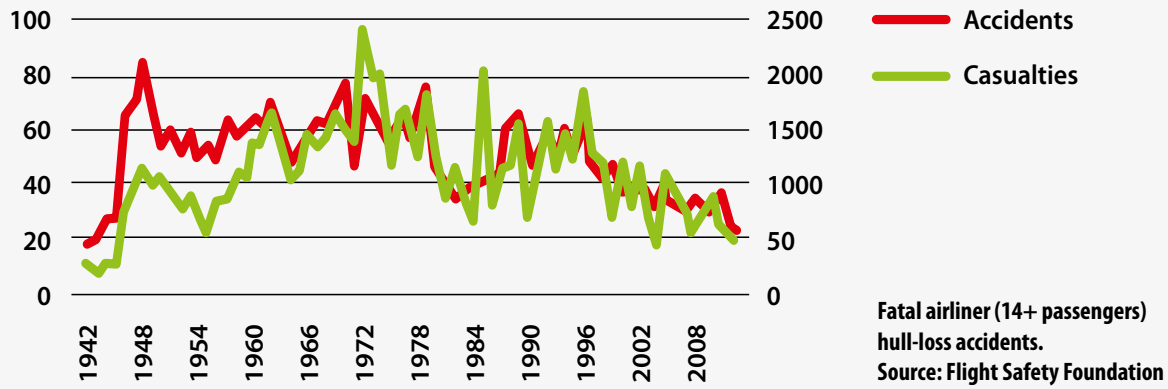
Cash is HOT and safety is NOT (cont'd)

What happened? Snowfall required de-icing that evening, which caused delays. The operator promoted a culture of being punctual and safe at the same time. The ground controller tried to help reduce delays by offering a non-standard taxiway routing for a non-standard intersection take-off. The pilots accepted this and so had to re-programme the flight computer as well as perform all the required checks and taxi the aircraft. This led to a take-off from a taxiway.

The recommendation by the Dutch transport safety board is clear: never sacrifice safety. Is that indeed a reasonable and practical recommendation in our present day world where the focus is on a financial crisis? This article aims to provide some food for thought.

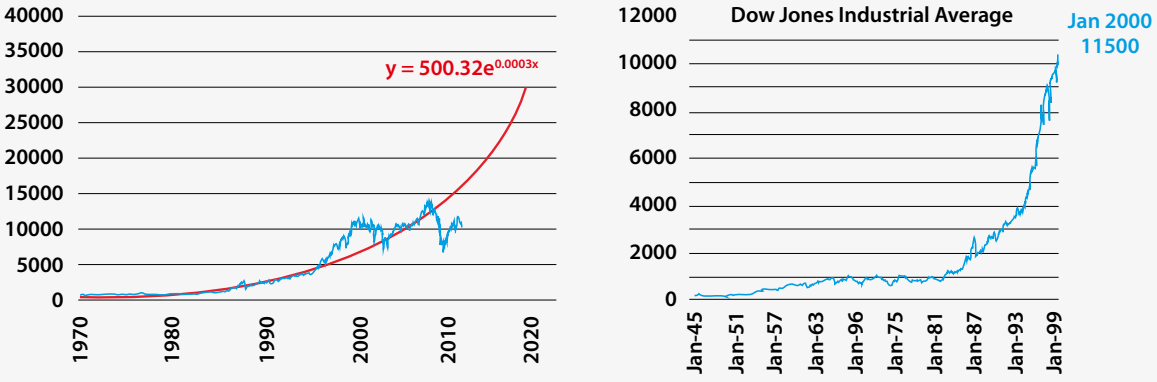
www.cheaptickets.xxx;
www. Safeflights.xxx

What happened with "safety first"? Has flight safety ever been the primary goal and is it now being seen as just another performance factor, following cost reduction initiatives? Various analysts see greed and a lack of adequate oversight in a liberalised banking system as major contributors to the present financial crisis. Ordinary people are now obliged to pay the price of that failed system with their life savings and pensions. A banking world that apparently considered earning money as being more important than responsibility to the financial system and to the people. This system was made possible by a failing oversight system. Is aviation going the same direction with more emphasis on cash and a paper-based safety oversight system?

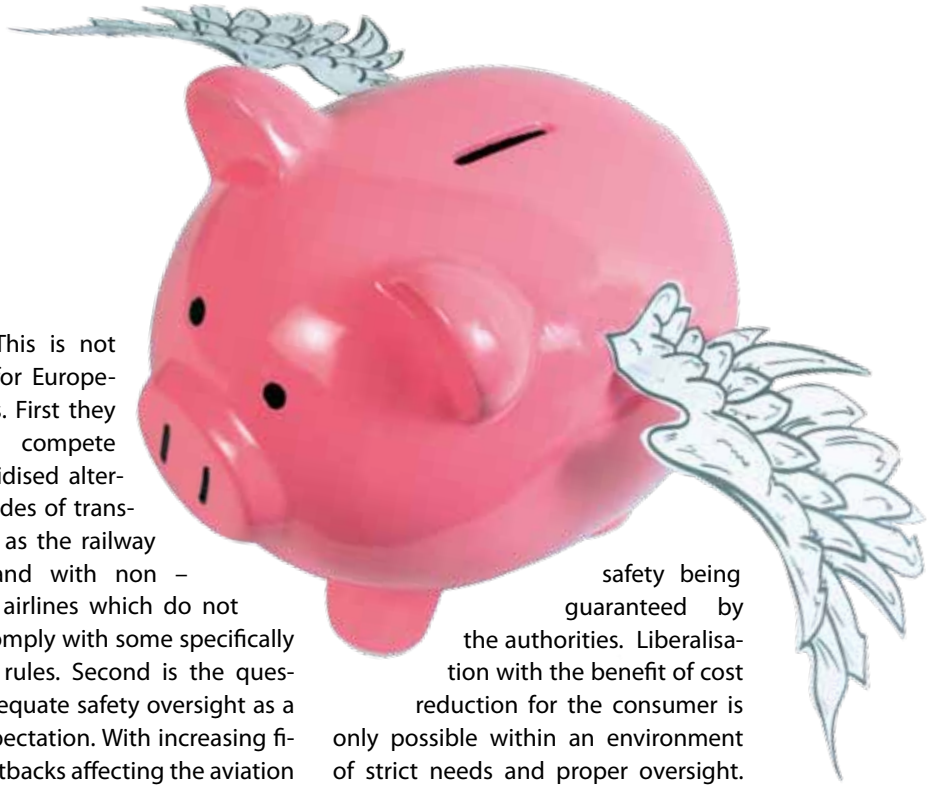


Above: *Looking at the statistics one could conclude that the trend is down and that in the future lower numbers of aviation casualties and accidents may be expected.*

Below: *Looking at the statistics, one could conclude the trend is up and the forecast in 2000 was a sharp increase of the DJI to above 20.000 in 2012. How different reality looks now with hindsight.*



Dow Jones Industrial Average 1945-2012 with predictions to 2020



Banking booby-trap.
In aviation it seems that nowadays ticket prices are the only concern of passengers, whilst safety is taken for granted. Passengers can check to the penny accurate the cheapest airfares on www.cheaptickets.xxx, but show no apparent interest in the actual levels of flight safety. Are passengers aware of the safety records and risks of specific airlines, airspaces or airports? No, safeflights.xxx as an open source for actual safety levels does not exist. If it did exist, would passengers really avoid flying to airports, through airspace or with airlines, which indicated an increased risk to their safety? Passengers assume that their personal safety is assured by the authorities and consider ticket-price / cost as being the only decision they need to make. Like the banking sector, where customers trusted their bank as being completely safe, the public was caught out by this missing information. With hindsight, I believe that it is time that these lessons learned are also introduced to the aviation sector.

Liberalisation reduces costs.
A truly liberalised market is seen as being beneficial to customers. The conditions essential for a free market include an unequivocal priority for public safety, a level playing field meaning business rules for open competition and adequate oversight. The question is if this approach applies to European aviation. First, a level playing field requires that all transport competitors compete using the same set of rules in order to allow fair competition. This is not the case for European airlines. First they have to compete with subsidised alternative modes of transport such as the railway system[1] and with non – European airlines which do not have to comply with some specifically European rules. Second is the question of adequate safety oversight as a public expectation. With increasing financial cutbacks affecting the aviation authorities, it might be logical to conclude that less effort, less quality and less intensity of oversight activities might occur. Such a 'light' approach is presented as an alternative method of oversight which relies on inspection of focusing more on reliance of management systems rather than on operational inspections. Effective safety oversight requires both.

Paper safety ≠ Passenger safety.
Reducing operational oversight leaves more room for organisations to take their business decisions unimpeded by all types of "useless" inspections. This could reduce costs and help improve profits, which seems to be good for the cash, good for ticket prices and thus good for the consumers. Some organisations, however, will, in the worst case, unwittingly seek the edges of tolerance. When authorities shift to implementing alternative systems of oversight, it might seem on paper that all is well when in reality it is not. In the meantime, the travelling public is still relying on a certain level of safety being guaranteed by the authorities. Liberalisation with the benefit of cost reduction for the consumer is only possible within an environment of strict needs and proper oversight. Without this the gap between cash and safety would widen, with the primary beneficiaries being the balance sheets of Companies and States.

Economic reality forces pilots to accept lower standards.
Is the previous development only to be seen in the boardrooms? No, if we look at operational staff, for example at pilots, then curious phenomena can be seen. The European Cockpit Association claims that the new European Flight Time Limitations could result in fatigue and thus endanger flight safety. At the same time, an increasing number of European pilots join companies flying under these more relaxed flight time rules. So why would these pilots accept the risk of fatigue and jeopardise safety? Well, how much choice is there for a pilot with a training cost debt of > €150.000 and no other way to pay it off? Whatever the reason, also here counts: cash is hot.

Safety is in our blood.
Safety should be in the blood of air traffic controllers, aerodrome operators and pilots and regulators. If not, things will go wrong. Regulatory oversight is changing, environmental and economical pressure on regulators is rising. So what can be done at the operational level to guarantee the main cornerstone of aviation safety? Wait until ac-

1- Ticket fares for European flights can be as low as € 9, whilst € 50 for a ticket to Barcelona (2000km) is considered "normal". A return train ticket over de distance of a tenth of that distance, 200 km, is in the Netherlands also € 50. The difference between these prices is not "normal", especially when one realizes that each train ticket is sponsored by taxpayers money up to 70%. In addition: When a train does not run due to technical problems (FYRA), even for years or months, passengers are not legally compensated by €250 or € 400 as they are in aviation according to EU regulation. And last but not east: European train bombings killed more passengers than then bombings in aviation in the last decade, but there are absolutely no security queues to be passed prior to boarding trains. And you are even allowed to take a litre of coca cola with you!

Cash is hot and safety is not (cont'd)

cident and incident figures start to rise and sooner or later the emphasis will shift from cash to safety again? Should they "go with the flow", stick strictly to the procedures, make sure that they cannot be held liable and hope that incidents will happen to organisations overseen by someone else not themselves?

"No runway-no business".
Passengers pay airport tax, for parking, food, to buy tax-free, etc. They are a great source of income. The only reason of existence for an airport is the transfer of passengers from ground to air and vice versa. Every airport has one unique selling item: their runway. "No runway, no business". Having to close a runway due to an incident or accident could not only be the result of the loss of lives and property but it will also reduce revenues and may even incur a possible payment of passenger compensation fees, although not by the airport. Therefore keeping runways safe is essentially good business. It is also good risk management; the likelihood of an aviation accident is low, if it happens the price is high. This is the everyday challenge for ATCO's and pilots who must take into consideration economic pressure, opportunity, time and fatigue pressures in addition to the European weather.

Captain Rob van Eekeren

is executive director of the World Birdstrike Association (former IBSC). A former KLM A330 Captain, Rob has been involved in improving runway safety for more than a decade. He is a JAA aerospace lead auditor for safety and quality management systems and,. Rob recently served as Chairman of the national transport and environment committee and on the technical board of Dutch ALPA.

So what makes the runway so special? A runway is not only a high-personal safety risk area, where 180 tons of fuel, carrying ±200 passengers, travelling at high speed with little possibility to manoeuvre around obstacles is a regular occurrence, it is also a high business risk area. It is important to note that the runway is exactly that area where three organisations (the airport as owner, the air navigation service provider and the aircraft operator as users) physically meet. It is known that this introduces potential interface problems. They all need to work flawlessly together, clarity is required in this high-risk area. A safe runway is much more a systemic issue of awareness of roles and responsibilities and teamwork rather than the sole responsibility of one actor.

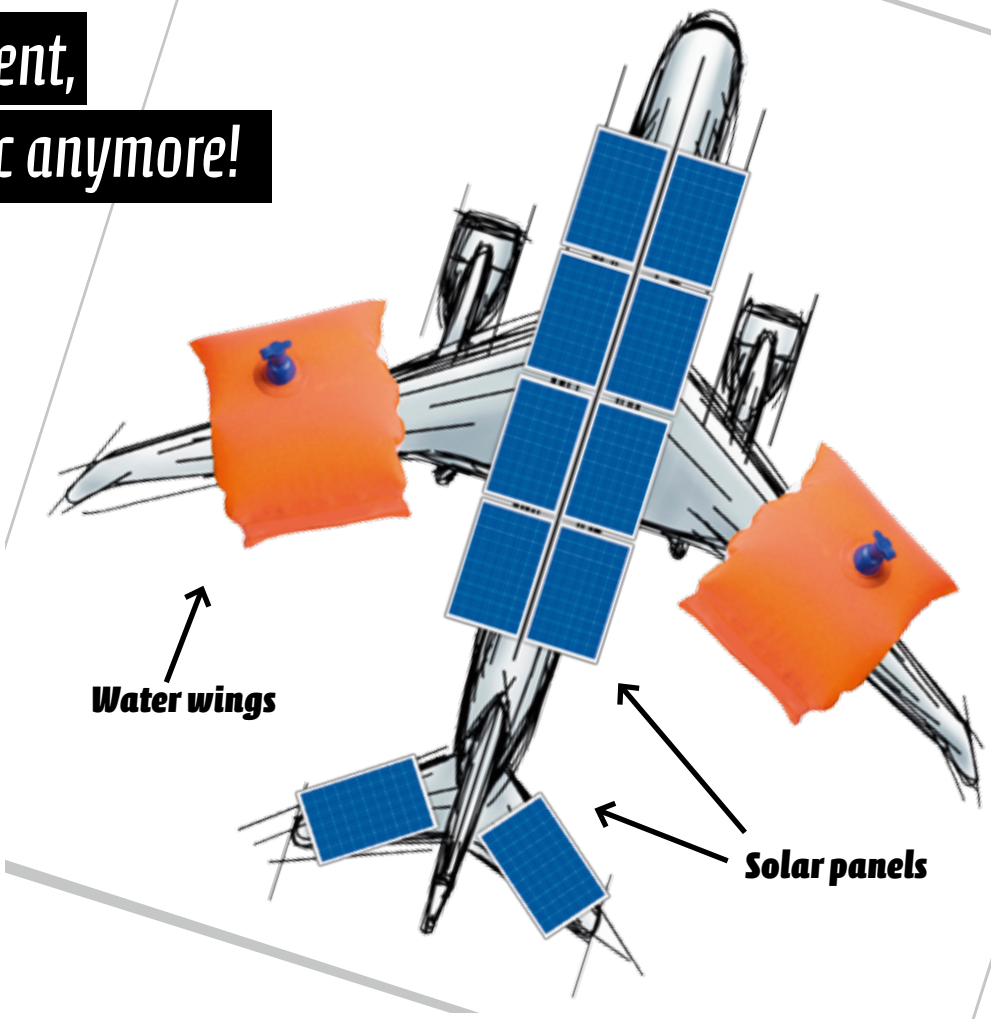
LRST
An important tool to overcome potential interface problems is the Local Runway Safety Team. For more than a decade, initiatives around the world have focused on improving runway safety, preventing runway incursions as well as runway excursions. Many of these initiatives were industry-driven and not initiated by the authorities. A group of industry representatives took the lead and worked together to identify best practices and new ideas and make recommendations. These people were not motivated by personal financial benefit but because aviation safety and responsibility towards passengers was in danger of being overlooked instead of overseen.

Even better was that during the whole process of drafting their documents, participating organisations began to adopt and implement some of the recommendations straight away. And even better than better was that other organisations started real innovations in countering the runway risks already during the whole process. As stated before, a LRST is one method to overcome potential interface problems. On many airports a LRST has been established, but it only exist on paper, so is it really breaking down interface problems? In other words, how effective is a particular LRST and who knows? Proper safety management systems will normally cover individual organisations like airlines, airports or ANSP's. However who monitors how they work together on, say the safety critical runway? I wonder if that fulfills the expectations of the traveling public and if it could be considered as good risk-management.

Risk management
In aviation the chance of being involved in a fatal accident is very, very slim. The Flight Safety Foundation reports 23 hull loss accidents in the year 2012 with 457 casualties. The top 50 airlines have a staggering 45,401,237,832,100 annual seat capacity. This means that the chance of a fatal accident would be almost 1: 100 billion. This makes a reactive safety approach not very comprehensive and makes a pro-active approach with proper reporting opportunities and operational and system inspections essential.

Due to the good safety records, the attention to safety may be overlooked; no wonder that the passenger focuses on ticket-prices. Although chances may seem very, very remote, actual risks may be unacceptably high and might even endanger your whole business. The core of an airport is its runway, not its security check or its tax free shop or the hotels or parking. No it is the runway. Therefore it is essentially good business to keep a safe runway.

Safer and cost-efficient, but not aerodynimic anymore!



Conclusion and recommendation:

Politics will continue to focus on consumer interest and will at the same time decrease government budgets for safety oversight. That could mean that authorities might reduce their direct oversight and audits, even in the increasingly liberalised market. The travelling public relies however on authorities guaranteeing adequate safety levels, not only security, but also including safety. Whether this is justified is not the issue, the fact is they do.

I believe that aviation safety is high because a combination of previous high levels of oversight within a just culture system and safety being in the blood of the major actors like pilots and air traffic controllers. Lack of adequate oversight in a liberalised financial market is seen by a number of authors as one of the major contributors of the financial crises. Drawing the parallel with the aviation industry, one could conclude that reliance based on statistics and the wrong approach to performance indicators, even when they look very promising, justifying the reduction of oversight by the authorities. This could prove to be very, very expensive and with hindsight of the banking crisis, immoral

With the political reality that perfect safety by oversight by the authorities is not to be expected, safety can only be achieved by a proper safety culture within the company and amongst other players in the aviation industry. The runway safety initiative proved that the aviation industry has the drive by itself to improve safety levels. Existing programmes like IATA's IOSA and ACI's APEX could form the basis of setting up a new voluntarily aviation industry initiated internal overall and integrated oversight programme. EUROCONTROL should also get involved in this as well.

In my opinion, the major problem however is that, contrary to, for example, security, there is no specific budget available for "safety". Either governments or passengers pay a "security tax", but a "safety tax" does not exist. In an era where cash is hot and safety not, this is a challenging topic. Here the European Commission could help by stimulating aviation industry initiatives to improve safety, by allocating federal budgets for aviation safety improvement. This would fulfil the expectations of the travelling public in respect of adequate oversight by guaranteeing that the just culture system in aviation is maintained.

The conclusion is that air traffic controllers and pilots face every day, day in day out, the pressure of capacity enhancement, delay recovery, punctuality, fuel saving and other economical factors. At same time they are also responsible for the highest possible standard of safety. With the present societal pressure to fly cheap, with safety taken for granted, the only ones who are in the position to actually weigh safety versus economics in the daily operations are pilots and air traffic controllers. They must have the courage and professionalism to withstand the pressure of their employers, the travelling public, politicians and society and focus always on safety. Without their professionalism a drift into failure could become a reality. Thus indeed, the Dutch Transport Safety Board were correct when they said that "The parties involved must weigh up the options and may obviously never sacrifice safety in an effort to be punctual".

Last but not least: I strongly believe that an integrated oversight should start with the topic of safe runway operations. Addressing safe runway operations as an integrated topic involving airport operators, air navigation service providers and airline operators via, external effective auditing will be beneficial for safety and economics. This approach will ensure that Cash and Safety are both HOT.