

UNSAFE SKIES

1. You won't be able to bring in reforms until people die

On 24 July last year a Qantas 737 with 87 people on board was approaching Canberra in darkness. After the crew accidentally entered the wrong data into the flight management system, the aircraft descended 1,600 feet below the legal minimum safe altitude, while heading towards Tinderry Peak. The aircraft was in full radar coverage but in uncontrolled airspace so no radar control was provided. It was only luck and the last resort black box warning system that saved the plane from hitting the mountain and everyone being killed.

It was the situation I had been dreading but expecting for many years.

This Qantas incident was very serious indeed. But after five months, the Australian Transport Safety Bureau – the independent safety investigator – published its final report. It commented on such things as crew fatigue and a faulty air conditioner in the aircraft, but made no recommendation on the major safety deficiency – that is, the airspace design and radar utilisation in Australia.

Only four days after this near disaster, a business turbo-prop aircraft was flying in the airspace south of Canberra towards Benalla. Like the Qantas situation, the aircraft was in full radar coverage and in uncontrolled airspace so no radar control was provided. Due to an error, the aircraft ended up more than ten miles away from its intended approach path and crashed into the terrain killing all six on board.

Just six months ago in May, an airliner was approaching Lockhart River in Cape York. Once again, the aircraft was in uncontrolled airspace with an experienced professional air crew. The aircraft crashed into a mountain ridge killing the 15 on board. This was Australia's first airline crash in more than 30 years.

Two months after that, a charter aircraft was flying to Mount Hotham. Once again, under full radar coverage, an experienced professional pilot inadvertently flew the plane into the ground killing all on board.

This is a total of 24 people dead in commercial aviation accidents in just over 12 months.

Just two months ago, a commuter airline with two professional pilots nearly ran out of fuel at night on a flight to Brisbane. At the last moment the pilot diverted to Bundaberg. One engine stopped from fuel starvation on the approach, and there was just enough fuel remaining to conduct an emergency landing on the other engine. If this flight crew, and the crew of the 737 weren't as lucky, there would have been 105 dead.

In 1990 when I was the CAA Chairman, a crusty old bureaucrat said to me words to the effect, "Dick, you won't be able to bring in reforms until people die – look at the history of world aviation - pilots always resist change. Air safety is only improved after a crash."

People are dying and nothing is being done. It is incredibly frustrating. Notice how there is hardly a word in the media about this spate of accidents. This is probably the worst commercial fatality rate ever. Remember the media campaign about the Monarch crash at Young in 1993, where seven people were killed? There were massive headlines, questions in Parliament, inquiries – the hysteria never stopped. I will explain the reason for the difference later in this presentation.

There are a number of things that are common with the accidents that killed the 24 people.

The aircraft were all flown by highly experienced professional pilots – not low time private pilots. That is why all of us who fly in commercial aircraft must be concerned. All the aircraft were in uncontrolled airspace. That is, the aircraft were not following the directions of an air traffic controller – they were flying in “do it yourself” airspace more akin to the 1920s and Bert Hinkler than the 21st century.

All the aircraft were flying in instrument conditions and appeared to be in good flying order when they collided with the ground. This is known as a “Controlled Flight Into Terrain”. Overseas, this type of airline accident has been reducing in number.

In the cases where radar was available, it was not used to warn the pilots that they were dangerously low or in the wrong location. In effect, the planes were operating “blind” on a local radio frequency with no trained radio operator at the airport able to give local weather or other safety information.

I’m sure that most Australians would believe that if flying in a jet airline aircraft that the aircraft would be under the control of an air traffic controller, and that at all airports, there would be a controller or a radio operator on the ground to give advice to the pilot.

The truth is quite different. Just a few weeks ago I departed Hamilton Island in an Airbus with over 150 passengers on board. It was probably only I, sitting in the rear of the aircraft, and the pilots up front, that knew that the control tower was not manned – and that for the first part of the flight, probably the riskiest part, we would be in a “do it yourself”, uncontrolled, “black hole” airspace system. No other modern aviation country allows this.

Only a few days before I had been in the Proserpine area, where the Virgin 737 was battling through the most terrible weather conditions, only able to fly by instruments, to land at the airport completely “calling in the blind” in uncontrolled airspace – without radar control – without an air traffic control tower, and without even a person on the ground trained to operate a radio to confirm that the plane’s radio was working correctly.

How does this extraordinary situation exist in Australia in the 21st century? How do the professional pilots allow it? It is quite a story.