

Swissair 111

The History behind this 1998 Airline Accident

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02 September 2018 (26 years later)



Swissair Flight 111 was a scheduled international passenger flight from John F. Kennedy International Airport in New York City, United States, to Cointrin Airport in Geneva, Switzerland. The flight was a codeshare flight with Delta Air Lines. On 2 September 1998, the McDonnell Douglas MD-11 operating this flight crashed into the Atlantic Ocean southwest of Halifax International Airport at the entrance to St. Margarets Bay, Nova Scotia, Canada, killing all 215 passengers and 14 crew members on board. The crash site was 8 kilometres from shore, roughly equidistant from the small fishing and tourist communities of Peggys Cove and Bayswater. It remains the deadliest accident in Swiss history, the deadliest involving the MD-11, and the second-deadliest aviation accident in Canada, behind Arrow Air Flight 1285R.

The search and rescue response, crash recovery operation, and investigation by the Government of Canada took more than four years and cost CA\$57 million.[3] The investigation carried out by the Transportation Safety Board of Canada (TSB) concluded that flammable material used in the aircraft's structure allowed a fire to spread beyond the control of the flight crew, resulting in the crash of the aircraft. Several wide-ranging recommendations were made, which were incorporated into newer US Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) standards. IASA (Lyn Romano's International Aviation Safety Association) participated in ensuring that the lessons learnt left a mark upon Civil Airline Aviation GLOBALLY.



The Tragic Legacy of Swissair Flight 111

By Lyn Romano

(Wife of Ray Romano, killed in the crash, and founder of the International Aviation Safety Association)

Seemingly decades ago, on 2 September 1998, Swissair Flight 111 crashed into the waters near Peggy's Cove, Nova Scotia, Canada. Some of the milestones that have transpired over the intervening ten years are: my two sons graduated from high school and attended college; my daughter and her family moved to upstate New York, and I continue to struggle, on a daily basis, to make any meaningful progress without my husband, Ray, who was killed in the crash, by my side.

When I established the International Aviation Safety Association (IASA), on 4 March 1999, it was my passionate desire to right many of the erroneous and long overdue aviation safety issues which the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) had wilfully overlooked. The deceitful cloak of Cost Benefit Analysis (CBA), the FAA's guiding force for inaction, should have been repudiated and trashed the night of the crash, when 229 innocent human beings were killed. The "translation" of CBA (in my humble opinion) is:

Enough human beings must be killed in a plane crash before correcting a dangerous situation, in order for the "fix" to be considered economically feasible.

It is a pragmatic and bureaucratic perspective that disavows human worth and familial affiliations. The same CBA model is applied to the economics of any proposed routine (and non-lethal) technical fix to airplane hardware. There's no discrimination for human worth.

Someone had to speak out for all the senseless deaths and the many families destroyed by the FAA's lack of attention to:

- The hazards associated with specific aircraft wiring insulation types, snaked throughout the airliner and long known for their ability to arc when chafed or cracked.
- The dangers of the metalized Mylar thermal acoustic insulation blankets, present throughout the airframe and highly flammable when ignited by an arcing wire. The FAA was alerted to this deadly

hazard by the Civil Aviation Administration of China (CAAC) in 1996, two years prior to the crash of Flight SR-111. The CAAC warned of blanket flammability and its tendency to propagate fire rapidly after experiencing a severe fire on a Chinese-registered B737, but their letter fell on deaf ears.

- To add insult to injury, an FAA Designated Alteration Station, or DAS (Santa Barbara Aerospace), approved the installation of the in-flight entertainment system (IFEN), which proved incompatible with the doomed Boeing MD-11's electrical configuration. It would later be confirmed that the technical expertise necessary to approve or deny such an installation was manifestly absent - yet the system was more or less "rubber-stamped" in an expedited and bogus "approval" process. The urgency was predicated upon the profits expected to be made from this in-flight gambling system.

All of these subsequent revelations translate into a supreme lack of oversight by the FAA. And we are now seeing from Congressional hearings that the FAA is too "cozy" with the airlines it is supposed to regulate (see Aviation Safety & Security Digest, 'Congress Seeks Separation of Agency from Airlines,' homepage).

Any reasonable human being would believe that each and every one of the Canadian Transportation Safety Board's (TSB) recommendations, contained in their final report of the Swissair accident, would have been acted upon by the FAA with the utmost expediency. That being said, let us take a look at how important the FAA feels the deaths of the 229 individuals really are, by looking at where some of those recommendations stand 10 years after the crash.

As recently as 29 June 2008, a fire broke out in the attic area of a B767, operated by Airborne Express, which eerily resembles what the pilots aboard Swissair Flight 111 experienced. The aircraft was not airborne at the time, and it will be very interesting to learn from the investigation just how similar this incident is when compared to what transpired over 10 years ago aboard Flight SR-111.

It would appear that not all flammable materials have been stripped from aircraft, as the TSB urged. The Mylar thermal acoustic insulation blankets were ordered removed, but not without the FAA dragging its feet for a full year before giving the airlines an additional 5 years to accomplish the task. What about other flammable insulation materials? One of the TSB's strong recommendations stated:

That regulatory authorities quantify and mitigate the risks associated with in-service thermal acoustic insulation materials that have failed the Radiant Panel Test.

Response Rating: Unsatisfactory

Is it possible that ten years after the crash of Flight SR 111 the TSB classifies this recommendation as “Unsatisfactory”? Apparently, that seems to be the case. This falls into the realm of complete and utter lack of respect for all those killed in the crash, not to mention a failure on the part of the FAA to accomplish its primary mandate as safety watchdog.

Another incident that calls FAA oversight into question is the recent grounding of hundreds of American Airline flights because of inattention to known wiring issues on their MD-80 fleet. American Airlines then assured the flying public that safety was never compromised. I find that claim rather absurd, considering the wide reaching effect of the grounding. At a time when airlines are struggling to remain solvent during a very difficult economic period for their industry, it is an insult and a nonsense for them to downplay the seriousness of the situation in such a PR-oriented dismissive fashion.

The stunning lack of FAA oversight is a phenomenon that recurs over and over again. It is this writer’s opinion that oversight should not stop at issuing Airworthiness Directives (ADs). It should include diligent follow-up, ensuring every AD issued is complied with within the parameters set forth. Trusting the airlines to comply, without any oversight by the issuing agency, is akin to leaving an unattended cookie jar on a table and directing children not to partake.

It would appear the FAA and Congress can live with the regulator being widely referred to as “the Tombstone agency.” While we are all expected to learn from our mistakes, in order to prevent history from repeating itself, the FAA appears not only to lack oversight, but insight and foresight as well. □

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