

Whyalla tragedy highlights Australian air safety concerns

Regina Lohr
9 June 2000

In the worst aviation accident in South Australia for 28 years, eight people on board a twin-engine Piper Navajo Chieftain owned by Whyalla Airlines are believed to have died last week when their plane plunged into the Spencer Gulf, about 10 km south of Whyalla, after both of its engines failed.

So far seven bodies have been recovered. The main wreckage was not found for six days, despite an extensive search effort covering 150 nautical miles. Under existing aviation regulations, the passengers were not required to wear lifejackets because the plane was carrying less than 10 passengers and flew within 80 km of land.

The plane was on a regular flight to Whyalla, a steel-making and industrial port about 250 km north-west of the state capital, Adelaide. The pilot and two of the passengers were close friends of the airline's managing director, Chris Brougham. Brougham's brother Kym is chief pilot and also a part-owner of the company.

The passengers on board were Peter and Wendy Olsen, farmers from Cleve with three teenage daughters, Sydney trade union official Neil Marshall, Adelaide lawyer Richard Deegan and three Whyalla residents: Chris Schuppan, Teresa Pawlik and Joan Gibbons. Peter Olsen was a cousin of South Australian Premier John Olsen.

Although it is not yet clear what caused the crash, it is obvious that something went terribly wrong. Ben Mackiewicz, the 21-year-old pilot, issued a mayday call shortly before the crash, alerting the authorities that his engines had failed. The chance of both engines breaking down simultaneously is extremely remote, virtually ruling out simple engine failure as the cause.

At first it was thought that the plane had run out of fuel. Subsequent investigations appear to indicate that the aircraft was loaded up with adequate fuel before leaving Adelaide.

Fuel contamination is considered unlikely, as the plane did not use Mobil Avgas. (Last December a black-

coloured contaminant was belatedly discovered in Mobil aviation fuel, causing engine failures. This resulted in the grounding of up to 5,000 piston-engine planes across eastern Australia.)

Questions were also asked whether a young pilot should have been given so much responsibility. Mackiewicz had been with the company for 18 months and was considered an experienced pilot with 2,000 hours' flying time.

In January, while flying the same plane, he had been forced to make an emergency landing in a paddock on the Yorke Peninsula, when one of the engines failed. The engine was subsequently replaced.

In June 1997 another crash landing prompted the Civil Aviation Safety Authority (CASA) to investigate the operations of Whyalla Airlines. A pilot flying eight rail workers home to Port Augusta from Cook in western South Australia ditched the plane in a paddock because he was not sure that he had enough fuel.

When the pilot was asked to explain why, when he first realised that he may have miscalculated the fuel level, he had not filled up at Nullarbor on the way to Port Augusta, he said that he had expected to get favourable winds. Whether he was under pressure to save on fuel is not known.

Investigations following this incident found 119 breaches of regulations. As a consequence, chief pilot Kym Brougham's approval was revoked. It was found that he had failed to obey licensing conditions and to properly roster and train crew.

However, CASA reached an agreement with Whyalla Airlines in March 1998, which allowed it to continue flying as long as it met certain conditions. On April 12 this year CASA approved Kym Brougham's reinstatement as chief pilot when his replacement, David Usher, left the company. Usher has refused to comment on his reasons for departing, saying simply: "The full story will be told in an inquiry."

Despite this record, CASA has indicated that, following what is described as a “snap audit,” the airline will be given the all-clear to resume operations next week. CASA spokesman Peter Gibson said no reason had been found to ground the airline.

This is before any inquiry into the latest accident. Police are still preparing a report for the state Coroner and the Australian Transport Safety Board is yet to perform an investigation.

Gibson has defended CASA's treatment of Whyalla Airlines. He insisted that CASA had maintained a high level of surveillance and auditing of the airline since 1997. “We haven't had any current problems which we're aware of at this stage,” he said, “and certainly they were operating like any regional airline.” He said the plane involved in the tragedy had been inspected during a routine audit in April, but no problems were detected.

A series of fatal accidents have raised doubts about CASA's effectiveness in guaranteeing air safety. CASA officials have admitted that the organisation failed to “properly regulate” a Sydney seaplane company, Aquatic Air, which was involved in a 1998 crash that killed five people. According to a newspaper report, the crash and a 1999 report on illegal engine repairs “revealed a flawed culture in the safety watchdog”.

Since the Whyalla accident, former CASA chairman, millionaire businessman Dick Smith, has made scathing attacks on CASA, warning of more accidents unless the organisation was overhauled. “When this report comes out, I bet you'll find that there have been more recent problems, but once again they'll be covered up in the mates' network,” he said.

In 1997 Smith wrote to CASA deputy director John Pike, raising concerns about Whyalla Airlines. “It's obvious from the report that this company should not be running a public transport operation,” he wrote.

Smith compared Whyalla's operations with Seaview Air and Monarch, two companies involved in fatal crashes in 1993 and 1994.

In June 1993 seven people were killed when an aircraft operated by Monarch crashed near Young in New South Wales. An investigation report by the Bureau of Air Safety accused CASA's predecessor, the CAA, of placing the commercial interests of airline operators ahead of the overall safety of passengers.

In October 1994 nine people were killed when a twin-engine Aero Commander operated by Seaview Air crashed into the Pacific Ocean en route from Sydney to Lord Howe Island. The regional airline had been cited by

CAA inspectors for serious operational deficiencies, including overloading and poorly kept logbooks. Nevertheless, the CAA had issued an upgraded Air Operator Certificate to Seaview Air even though CAA's local airworthiness manager had recommended against the decision. Seaview's chief pilot had resigned seven months before the crash, complaining of lax safety standards.

While criticising CASA, Smith is leaving out one vital point—his own role in the history of the organisation.

The previous federal Labor government set up the Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) in 1988 with a board of directors instructed to turn it into a profitable enterprise. In 1991 Smith presided over a drastic restructure of the CAA under the slogan of “affordable safety”. Smith boasted that he had saved the CAA \$200 million in “excessive regulation” and doubled its profits. Staff cuts alone yielded \$85 million.

The very conception of “affordable safety” requires that safety rules and surveillance be subordinated to government budget restrictions and commercial profit requirements.

Until recently, safety concerns were generally confined to small regional operators and airlines, but danger signals have begun to appear with the large airlines as well. Last September Qantas suffered the worst accident in its history, when a 747 jet overshot the runway in Bangkok causing damage worth \$100 million. Not long before, the company had announced a record profit of \$420 million, based on cost cutting and increased productivity. Since then, however, the company has suffered one mishap after the other, with airline unions pointing to the impact of sweeping maintenance job cuts.

With increasingly cut-throat competition in the airline industry globally, companies large and small are under pressure to pare all areas of expenditure to the bone. Whether the official inquiries uncover the causes of the Whyalla tragedy, a common thread has emerged over the past decade—the drive for profits has led to reduced regulation, decreased surveillance, lack of enforcement, and ready official agreements with operators.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact