

Thought Leadership

Zero Tolerance?



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During a recent attempt to penetrate the morass of information that exists in, what is called, cyberspace trying to research a specific matter relating to Human Factors, which I will get to in due course, I was unwittingly led to a corner of the EASA website that publishes SIBs: Safety Information Bulletins, the particular item that caught my attention was SIB 2009 – 22 issued 29 July 2009.

The subject: Fighting Fires Caused by Lithium Type Batteries in Portable Electronic Devices (PEDS)

The Purpose: To recommend procedures for fighting fires caused by lithium type batteries in portable electronic devices.

The publication draws the reader's attention to a Department of Transportation. Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) Safety Alert For Operators (SAFO) instructing Air carriers on the methods of dealing with spontaneous combustion events in Lithium batteries contained within PEDs; Laptops, Phones, Personal Game devices etc.

The Fire Safety Branch of the FAA have been testing batteries over a period of time and investigating methods of fighting the resultant fires so those of us who operate the aircraft this Bulletin applies to stand some sort of chance of dealing with the ensuing blaze emanating from a battery when it embarks on a Thermal Runaway.

Perhaps it is this sort of advice that encouraged NorthWest Airlines to ban the use of personal laptops on the Flight Decks of their aircraft.

Despite this ban the Flight Deck crew of NWA Flight No 188 on 21st October 2009 decided to open their PC's and discuss the new roster policy introduced into the company following a recent merger. The discussion became so intense the Flight Deck Crew who had a combined flight time of some 31,000 hours, lost track of where they were to the point their flight became a NORDO (non radio communications).

Despite calls from ATC, operations and other agencies the pilots did not become aware of the fact they had overflown their destination at 37 000' until one of the three cabin crew entered the flight deck 5 minutes before their original ETA to enquire what time they were landing.

The, presumably, embarrassed pilots rectified the situation and the aircraft complete with 144 passengers arrived at Minneapolis slightly later than advertised having continued past their destination by 150 Nautical Miles.

A Boeing 737 in 2006 during a landing approach to East Midlands Airport, the pilot inadvertently disconnected the autopilot leading to a high rate of descent. A go-around was called, but it was too late to avoid contacting the ground, breaking off the right main landing gear.

The aircraft diverted to Birmingham where an emergency landing was subsequently made without injury.

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On Wednesday 19th November 2009 in the dying moments of a World Cup Qualifier in the Stade De France, Thierry Henry, witnessed by millions, handled the ball, twice, which allowed him to deliver a World quality cross to team mate William Gallas, who duly obliged, and headed the ball into the Republic of Irelands open goal mouth; in an instant, ending the luckless Irish's' hopes and dreams of World Cup glory.

The pilots involved in the incidents discussed had the courage of their convictions to put their hands up to their failures, on the other hand, as it were, Thierry Henry had no choice but to admit to his misdemeanour, the only person who seemed to not see the event was the referee. Whom one would imagine, has watched the replay many times since his final whistle. In each instance the judgement, by the peers, of the individuals involved in these incidents has been swift.

In all three of these events the public, relevant industry professionals and the media have voiced their opinions.

The individuals concerned have had the ignominy of being named publicly and the acute embarrassment of facing their relatives, friends and colleagues to explain their actions after the event. Many of whom would have offered support whilst privately condemning the individuals concerned actions; Erica Cantona was quoted, publicly, as being inclined to punch Henry.

It is without doubt their actions will have far reaching effects on their lives. Their reputations are irreversibly damaged to some degree or other.

Greater still is the damage done to the name of a company, industry or the nation who employs these individuals, fans, customers, other businesses and nations will remember these events, more vaguely, as time goes by, but the collective long term judgement will be coloured.

As a pilot I have lost count of the times I have been told your job is easy, all you do is press buttons and the rest is taken care of by the computers all on a king's ransom for a salary. I would imagine, top class footballers are often told how it must be easy to turn up and kick a ball about for 90 minutes and get paid the equivalent to a small Countries GDP for the privilege.

The events discussed will have done nothing to dispel the impressions of those who do not understand the effort it takes to become a professional in any chosen profession or career path other than their own.

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In the case of the two NorthWest pilots their licences have been suspended pending further investigation, comments on various websites and blogs generally point the finger of blame at these two professionals and they are judged accordingly.

Many contributions and posts have described the punishment these pilots should receive and anger is vented by fellow professionals on the negative effect their actions have on the aviation community, wages, flight time and duty limitations and cabin crew do not escape mention or, in some cases, associated blame.

In the case of the UK Pilots who diverted “safely” to Birmingham the report states:

*The resulting Aircraft Accident Investigation Branch (AAIB) report (2008) highlighted **a number of causal and contributory factors**, including inappropriate transmission of a company message at a late stage (500 feet) of a Category III automatic approach, and ineffective training of the co-pilot – the latter prompting a recommendation that the regulatory authority require the operator to review their standard operating procedures.*

As a result of the accident, approximately one month later, the operator sacked the pilot and was quoted (Mail Reporter, 2006) as saying, “Although the AAIB investigation continues, it has been established that the automatic pilot was disengaged. That is down to human error. Although the pilots did manage to recover superbly and made a text book emergency landing at Birmingham airport, they instigated the incident with a momentary lapse and the company operates a zero accident tolerance level”.

As I read through the various websites and blogs regarding the Thierry Henry incident it is difficult to find a supporting voice however I was gladdened to come across one voice of reason and one who succinctly puts the issue of blame into perspective he is; David Beckham who is quoted as saying “I am sure Thierry did not get up in the morning and plan to Cheat”

Just Culture

In any fair society we believe in the premise: Presumed Innocent until proven Guilty, we do not subscribe to inappropriate blame and we collectively believe in a fair trial.

The common belief: Technology will solve all problems is prevalent in these incidents.

The sophisticated Automatics of any modern Jet ensure the operators have enough mental capacity to deal with those moments when things are not going according to plan.

A cat III landing in Low Vis Ops is a process driven exercise which requires good crew coordination, appropriate SOPs and an unprecedented level of concentration.

The Football Industry believes technology will be the end of all cheating and will assist referees in making “correct” decisions; one reporter said the Swedish referee made a blatantly incorrect decision to award the goal and the Telegraph website of 21 11 09 declares: ***Martin Hansson blasted in homeland for failure to spot Thierry Henry handball.***

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We expect the best from ourselves and those around us (an expectation of perfection) in discussion we will mitigate violation yet, if we are really honest and I mean really honest with ourselves, our real anger comes from the knowledge that these people are no different to ourselves.

Pilots do read in flight they are allowed to power nap, the rule is one watches the shop the other monitors the aircraft yet how many of us can tell stories of looking up from our turn to not watch the shop, and seeing our colleague in the other seat, engrossed in a news article, or a section of the ops manual that he or she would like to read up on before going into the sim later in the month. Furthermore how many of us have eaten a meal at the same time as the other member of the flight deck crew. How many Pilot's take Laptops, iPods, personal DVD players or other PEDs onto busy flight decks despite the knowledge of how distracting these gadgets can be.

How many of us have stood on the terraces and cheered whilst jumping around with complete strangers in a state of almost, collective ecstasy, when our own players have dived, handled or ensured the advantage was taken when the referee was blindsided , and “we” won!

My questions are:

- ▶ How many Captains, in any airline, senior, training or otherwise turn up with newspapers and magazines, or plan to read the ops manual during a flight with a perceived long sector?
- ▶ How many ops ground-based professionals have said to themselves “Pilots will be using the automatics, I need an answer now” - then make a radio transmission seeking an answer in the full knowledge where the aircraft is, in relation to its schedule rather than wait until a more appropriate time?
- ▶ How many pilots knowing they should not answer a call below a certain height on an approach would answer it?
- ▶ How many managers, club chairmen or team officials have encouraged their top players to be “professional” and take a chance in a high profile game?
- ▶ It is interesting to note the manager from the company who sacked their pilot because of zero accident tolerance level did not take punitive action against him or herself - for not ensuring correct crew composition and training as a confirmed causal factor!
- ▶ We believe in a Just Culture for ourselves as individuals, we extend that to our families and close friends then why not complete strangers, anyone, even the famous, are entitled to a fair trial and fair hearing - above all they are entitled to be human.

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Substitution

In any investigation into any event, there has to be a real sense of fairness and accuracy, during this process.

The framework and guidelines must be understood and followed by all involved and there is no room for emotion or the punishment to be driven by the outcome of the event, it is down to intention and the actions of the individual.

At some point the question must be asked:

Given the same set of circumstances, environment and conditions what would a similarly experienced individual do if presented with the self same situation?

Did any of the individuals involved get up on the morning concerned and say “Today I am going to deliberately get it wrong and expose myself to the world”.

Reflection

I did not find the article I originally set out to read, I became distracted and, frankly, I have forgotten what it was exactly I was looking for, I may remember at 3 o'clock in the morning at some point and will curse myself for not putting a notepad and pen by my bed as I keep threatening to do.

I will have a new respect for my Hewlett Packard Mobile Workstation now it is renamed a PED. More importantly I will be aware of the Lithium Battery hidden in the base of the machine, will it stop me taking it on a plane? Would it stop anyone, will it stop you?

I have long been against zero tolerance statements and bold accusations.

I turn, again, to David Beckham for some sense in this matter...

Asked whether he would have done the same thing in a similar situation, Beckham said: "Who knows in that situation? You're playing in a qualifier to go through to the World Cup; you don't know what you're doing.

"I've been involved in big games and reacted to certain things and looked back and thought I was wrong to do that."

Perhaps before we point the finger of blame at anyone we should think “There but for the grace of my particular god, go I”