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Lest We Forget

by Philip Baum

The news reports of the untimely passing of the famous can often live on for much longer than the average life expectancy. Many readers will be able to recall precisely where they were and who they were with when they heard of the deaths of John F. Kennedy, Princess Diana and Marilyn Monroe.

Large-scale human tragedies, unless one is personally touched by them, generally have short term impact. Deaths as a result of famine in Ethiopia, earthquakes in Turkey, tidal waves in the South Pacific or a nuclear disaster in Chernobyl are quickly forgotten. In such cases the cause, often being nature itself, is known. Celebrity deaths, however, are often shrouded in conspiracy theories.

So too, it seems, with airline disasters. Although in the initial aftermath of the Egyptair crash, other than vague speculation that the Bermuda Triangle had moved northwards, I was impressed at the restraint shown by the mass media; there was little talk of sabotage or stray US Navy missiles. This, in part, was due to the premature media frenzy that surrounded the TW800 crash in 1996. At that time few pundits were prepared to consider mechanical failure as a cause. The official investigation report however dampened the enthusiasm of many of the conspiracy theorists, although many are still sticking to their guns.

As far as the Egyptair investigation was concerned, once it became public knowledge that the NTSB was going to play second fiddle to the FBI, there was an almost audible sigh of relief amongst the media. They relish the opportunity to scare-monger and the intricate human stories that can be woven in a criminal investigation are far more appetising than speculating about whether the B-767's thrust reversers are prone to deploying mid-flight.

Now we could contemplate sabotage. If so, how? Cargo? That would really shake up the aviation industry. Passenger baggage? But it had been screened by FAA-certified equipment. If that had failed, then where would we be? Yet the sudden plunge of the aircraft, followed by its brief ascent and final dive into the Atlantic Ocean suggested that the solution to the problem lay in cockpit activity. The auto pilot had been manually disengaged before descent commenced.

The suggestion of pilot suicide quickly surfaced once the cockpit voice recorders had been recovered. It then appeared that the Captain had left the cockpit and that the co-pilot probably had control of the aircraft when the dive was initiated.

Yet, what about hijacking? There were thirty high-ranking Egyptian military personnel on board. It would not have been

the first time a suicidal terrorist had succeeded in completing such a mission. The presence of a hijacker in the cockpit could have justified the pilot's prayers.

In Egypt, understandably, few wish to accept the fact that one of their own pilots could have knowingly murdered so many. Yet, so soon after the report into the 1997 SilkAir crash concluded that pilot suicide was the probable cause in that incident, pilot mental stability had suddenly become a major concern. There is certainly a strong argument for the installation of cockpit cameras to provide a pictorial account of cockpit activity in an accident investigation.

There will eventually be a report into the Egyptair crash and conclusions will be drawn. The industry, however, need not await conclusions before acting. We do not need to prove pilot suicide – it's enough to acknowledge that the possibility exists. All carriers need to ensure that they screen and monitor their crews sufficiently to identify possible mental instability.

The opportunity that a hijacker has to enter a cockpit also needs to be addressed. Whilst there are strong arguments from a CRM (crew resource management) perspective for an open door policy, perhaps carriers should consider adopting the US locked door procedure.

In either scenario the downside of the automation of cockpit procedures has resulted in the possibility of one pilot being left alone in the cockpit. Perhaps we should reassess the advisability of permitting that to occur.

We cannot prevent every act of unlawful interference, especially when the crews themselves could be the perpetrators. And, when accidents do occur, there is bound to be wild speculation as to the cause. For those of us within the industry, the response will be more considered but, like the celebrity deaths, we will never forget the moment we first heard the news. Many readers will recall exactly where they were and who they were with when they heard of the demise of flights such as Pan Am 103, TW800 and Egyptair 990.

Despite the conspiracy theories that surround JFK 'the man' and JFK 'the airport', our challenge is clear – to react to what has happened and to be proactive to ensure it doesn't happen again.

I was taking my children to a Halloween party in London when I heard about the Egyptair crash on the car radio. The next day, as I flew to New York, I gazed around the cabin looking at the different passenger types. Each person had a story. Each person had loved ones. Each person had confidence in the airline they had chosen and the airport they had just departed from. So did those aboard Egyptair 990.