

Jets don't age like wine

We are facing a crack epidemic. Not the hysteria over drugs currently being promoted by politicians and the media, but a widespread problem that poses a growing threat to the safety of air travel. Our aircraft are growing old, and some say, dangerous.

On Tuesday, an Indian Airlines Boeing 737 crashed while trying to land in thick, early morning fog at Ahmadabad. I have been on many similar Indian Airlines flights, fighting into rough landings through fog or high winds. News of this crash gave me sweaty palms. A day earlier, a Ugandan airliner crashed at Rome while trying a landing under similar conditions.

Accidents happen, particularly when pilots try to keep to tight schedules. But it was notable that the 17-year-old Indian 737 happened to be one of the oldest in its fleet.

Why aircraft age is a vital issue was illustrated in a frightening report by the U.S. National Transportation Safety Board. A 19-year-old Continental Airways 737 went in for repainting. It had been routinely inspected in May for corrosion or cracks and passed all tests. When the paint was stripped off, however, 30 inches of cracks were found, including one that was 12 inches long. The NTSB described this as "a chilling discovery."

Particularly chilling because last April the roof of an Aloha Airlines 737 blew off 24,000 feet above the ocean between Hilo and Honolulu. This aircraft held the record for the second highest number of flights in the world's fleets of 737s—an incredible 90,000 takeoffs and landings. The Continental 737 had logged 55,000.

The concern that aging jets are dangerous has produced a furious debate within the aircraft community. Manufacturers like Boeing and McDonnell-Douglas insist their aircraft can be flown almost indefinitely, provided they are properly maintained. Age has nothing to do with safety, they say. This argument sounds reasonable when you look at the great number of DC-3s, C-47s and B-52s built by these firms that are still flying today. Many DC-3s are 40 years old; the B-52s an

Punch



"That's the second time you've mugged your own mother this week, you moron!"

ERIC MARGOLIS



average of 32 years. Older, in many cases, than the pilots who fly them.

But these superb aircraft were built in an age that put solidity and quality above revenue per mile. In today's fiercely competitive, vulture-eat-vulture airline business, aircraft are designed for lightness, fuel efficiency and the ability to pack in passengers.

What's more, commercial aircraft fly more than military aircraft and often don't receive the same level of careful maintenance. Another major problem is the shifting of aircraft between airlines through mergers or sales. Aircraft maintenance records are often missing or incomplete. Recently, I was on a South African Airways flight—an excellent airline, I might add—that had a spot of engine trouble before takeoff. The pilot candidly informed us the reason was that the plane had been on lease to a Latin American carrier whose maintenance "had not been up to snuff."

I think aging aircraft are a serious problem. Recent studies have shown that corrosion and ensuing metal fatigue are far more prevalent than formerly believed. Older generations of aircraft, like the 737, were simply not signed for 90,000 takeoffs and landings. They came from a more genteel era of air travel.

This also holds true for Air Canada's elderly fleet of DC-9s. They are showing signs of advanced wear and tear and should be retired.

Must we wait for a disastrous accident for Air Canada to accelerate its program to replace them?

As a defensive air traveller, I try to avoid elderly aircraft—keeping in mind that it is better to be on an old aircraft with a good crew than on a new one with beginners. Paint on aircraft is like make-up on women of a certain age. I usually peer inside the overhead baggage bins and around the galleys; they are a good indicator of the aircraft's age and the quality of its care.

Beware, as well, lots of Third World airlines that buy fifth-hand aircraft from who knows where. When you see rust and corrosion inside the cabin, it's a good bet there's plenty of it around vital areas as well.

At home, we should not have such problems. I don't like government interfering in commerce but in the case of the airline industry, I think Ottawa and Washington must take action on the issue of aircraft age. We urgently need a thorough study of the matter and even more thorough inspections of older aircraft. In my humble view, once an aircraft reaches 40,000 flights, it's time for the scrapyard. I'll happily pay a few dollars more for this extra security.