

Australian airline ignores critical maintenance checks

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The circumstances surrounding the grounding of six Boeing 767-200 wide-bodied aircraft on December 22 in Australia raise serious questions about the existing air safety system and the role of the Civil Aviation Safety Authority (CASA), the government's so-called aviation watchdog.

The six Ansett Airline aircraft used on domestic air routes were taken out of service after it was discovered that they had not undergone a scheduled maintenance check required by Boeing when the 767-200s have completed 25,000 take-offs and landings, or "cycles". All of the grounded aircraft had reached this figure. At least one had exceeded 30,000 cycles.

The special "high-cycle" inspections are essential for safe performance. They involve checks that cannot be made visually and include detailed ultrasonic inspection of the aircraft body panels to detect minute stress cracks caused by repeated pressurisation and depressurisation. The inspection cannot be carried out without removing parts. It requires at least four days, or even longer if faults are detected.

Ansett baldly claimed that its failure to carry out the crucial inspections was an "oversight". Boeing simply said that it had not noticed that the checks were overdue. While these "explanations" in themselves are cause for concern, what followed was even more alarming.

After a two-day meeting with Ansett and Boeing representatives, supposedly called to question them on the "oversight," CASA cleared the six jets for service and gave the airline 90 days grace to perform the detailed checks. Within 48 hours of being grounded over a serious safety breach, the planes were allowed to operate, permitting Ansett to move thousands of passengers over the peak Christmas holiday season.

Defending the extraordinary decision, CASA spokesman Peter Gibson said he was "satisfied they [the aircraft] are perfectly safe". A representative for the airline said: "Ansett is totally satisfied with the safety and integrity of our operations." But neither spokesman attempted to explain how it was possible to give such definitive assurances when the necessary inspections had not been carried out and in some cases were long overdue.

To make matters worse CASA agreed to allow the airline to conduct its own internal investigation of the incident. Even

before the in-house investigation began, CASA announced that legal action against Ansett was "unlikely" because "there is no evidence that the inspections were deliberately missed".

Gibson claimed: "Where people make mistakes the emphasis is always on identifying the problem, and then to look more broadly at whether there are any systems that need to be in place to prevent this sort of thing happening again." Allowing the airline to "investigate" its own negligence only increases the likelihood that the underlying causes will never be identified and nothing will change.

These events highlight the serious compromising of air safety standards that has taken place since 1990 when the Labor government deregulated the airline industry. As part of the deregulation, the previous government-supervised system of safety standards was replaced with "self regulation" by the airlines themselves.

CASA, which used to have engineers on site at the major airlines to constantly monitor every aspect of maintenance and safety, was reduced to "auditing" the maintenance schedules and agreements to be carried out by the companies. What has been revealed, however, is that these minimal requirements have not been carried out and, even under the public spotlight, CASA is more concerned with the operating requirements of the airlines than with safety. "Self-regulation" by the airlines turns out to be a recipe for non-regulation.

CASA has now acknowledged that Ansett failed to act promptly on many of the maintenance notices issued by Boeing and admitted it only ordered the airline to treat every maintenance directive as mandatory after the December 22 incident.

Other deficiencies have also come to light:

* An article in the *Australian* newspaper on January 4 pointed out that in 1999 CASA became aware that Qantas had incrementally altered its pilot training and performance review over several years in breach of agreed procedures. CASA, however, did not investigate the impact of these changes on safety.

At least one of the changes has led to a number of serious landing incidents. In 1999, a Qantas plane carrying 410 passengers overran the runway at Bangkok airport. The pilots told investigators that they relied solely on the braking system

and did not use full reverse thrust on the wet runway because of a management decision to change standard operating procedures, presumably to save on fuel. Qantas only changed its directive last September because of “an increased number of weather related runway overruns”.

* On January 8, CASA finally ordered Ansett and Qantas to undertake urgent checks of all their aircraft with General Electric CF6 engines. In mid-December, the US National Transport Safety Board (NTSB) had issued an urgent alert warning that there was potential for a “catastrophic accident” after a US Airways jet blew apart during a ground running test at Philadelphia airport. A disc in the high-pressure turbine exploded, blasting shards of metal into the aircraft engine, body and the nearby river.

CASA claimed to have “passed on” the information to the Australian airlines, but it did not treat the warning as urgent. It admitted later to having known about the danger since September after the NTSB began investigating an incident involving the CF6 engine. The checks were only ordered after CASA received notification from its British counterpart that inspections had been undertaken in the UK.

Again the reason appears to be costs. An article in the *Wall Street Journal* commented that the inspections mandated by the US Federal Aviation Administration, designed to detect cracks caused by metal fatigue in titanium spools in the CF6 engines, “have become so time consuming they threaten to force planes out of regular service” and “seriously disrupt airline schedules”.

There is considerable pressure on all the airlines to cut costs in maintenance and other areas. A report last November showed that Ansett was operating at a loss and that its share of the domestic market had fallen from more than 50 percent to 41.5 percent due to aggressive competition from Qantas and the emergence of two new competitors, Virgin Blue and Impulse Airlines.

Over the past decade airlines internationally have been forced to restructure their operations to cut costs, downsize their workforces and increase workloads. Over this period maintenance jobs at Australian airlines have been cut back through sackings and attrition, seriously affecting the availability of skilled engineers and tradesmen. John Wood, former chairman of CASA's pilot training council, commented recently that “the damage from years of cutting back the hands-on experience of flying and engineering staff has now taken their toll”.

In the early 1990s, Qantas sacked more than 300 of its national maintenance workforce of 5,000 and has subsequently reduced numbers even further through voluntary redundancies. In 1997 the company ended its apprentice training scheme and refused to employ about 40 apprentices who had just completed their time.

On January 5, the Amalgamated Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU) revealed that more job losses could be in the

pipeline. A union bulletin stated that Qantas had refused the AMWU access to a new business plan that involved further cost cutting and increased outsourcing of maintenance functions that would sharply impact on engineering jobs.

The recent takeover of Ansett by Air New Zealand will result in another round of job cuts as the newly merged entity restructures its operations to eliminate “duplication,” particularly in maintenance and administration. According to airline unions, the changes could result in the loss of up to 3,000 jobs.

The deterioration of airline maintenance was highlighted in a survey of 1,400 aviation maintenance engineers conducted by the Australian Transport Bureau in 1998 that showed “widespread maintenance deficiencies”. Just under a third of the engineers said they had, on occasions, taken “shortcuts” and “omitted a functional check” because “of lack of time”.

When asked why safety breaches occurred, more than 20 percent of those interviewed said it was because of stress associated with the heavy workload and staff shortages. Other reasons cited were fatigue, tiredness, lack of training, poor supervision, inadequate equipment and dated work manuals.

Despite the recent events the federal government has made clear it has no intention of abandoning the present system of self-regulation. Transport Minister John Anderson has ordered “a review” of the present system that could lead to a “shakeup of the internal management of both airlines.” This week the Australian Transport Safety Bureau announced that it would conduct its own investigations of the airlines and the increasingly discredited CASA.

However, Anderson's office has also stated that there “would be no return” to the more stringent hands-on monitoring of the past. The government's reaction and that of CASA in the face of growing evidence that the ingredients are present for a major air disaster, confirms a terrifying truth. No matter what the human cost, the profits of the airlines will continue to take precedence over the safety of passengers and crew.



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