

Qantas's near mid-air disaster highlights safety concerns

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A life-threatening incident last week involving an “uncontained” explosion in a Rolls Royce Trent 900 engine on an A380 airbus operated by Australian carrier Qantas has again focused world attention on declining safety levels at the company and across the airline industry.

The explosion occurred shortly after flight QF32 had taken off from Singapore, en route to Sydney. The aircraft was forced to turn back and make an emergency landing. It was pure luck that there were no fatalities or injuries among the 466 passengers and crew on board, and that no one was hit by the debris from the shattered engine that rained down on residential areas on the Indonesian island of Batam.

After days of cover-up by Qantas, information has begun to emerge about the full extent of the incident. According to media reports, one wing on the A380 was struck by flying fragments, which ruptured a fuel tank and damaged wiring to the wing's other engine. The explosion precipitated more than 60 error messages and 50 systems failures, including the left-side fire extinguishers, the auto-brakes and the anti-skid system, which prevents the wheels from locking and tyres bursting on touchdown. If a fire had broken out in the other engine, pilots would not have been able to activate extinguishers. After the plane landed, this engine could not be turned off for more than an hour.

The near mid-air disaster was just one of a series of serious incidents over the last four years involving Qantas aircraft, as the carrier has slashed operational jobs, closed maintenance facilities and revised maintenance and inspection programs.

A day after the A380 incident, a Qantas 747-400 was met by fire crews at London's Heathrow airport after a suspected hydraulic fuel fault. Hours later, a Qantas 747 suffered an engine flame-out and was forced to return to Singapore, 20 minutes after take-off. Ironically, Captain

Richard de Crespigny, the pilot who had battled for three hours the day before to bring the stricken A380 under control, was on board the 747, as were other crew and passengers from flight QF32.

The avoidance of a major disaster due to last week's engine explosion was in no small measure due to the skill, competence and professionalism of Captain de Crespigny, now popularly dubbed Captain Marvel, as well as other pilots and crew on board.

According to one media report, de Crespigny confronted “an engine [that] had just exploded in a ball of flame under the left wing of his A380, severing vital wires to another engine, rendering it inoperable, and damaging the hydraulic flaps that enabled him to land safely. A pierced fuel tank was gushing, and he would have to rely on gravity to bring his nose wheel down, while landing at a high speed. Another slight malfunction and it was all over”.

Clearly concerned about Qantas's reaction to the incident, de Crespigny reportedly gave his mobile phone number to passengers, telling them to contact him directly if they were dissatisfied with the airline's customer service response.

Australian and International Pilots Association vice-president David Backhouse accused all airlines of lowering safety, maintenance and training standards. “These incidents are coming up much more often than we'd like and that is a concern, not just for pilots but for crew and passengers,” he said. “It is always concerning when these incidents happen but particularly so when they happen so close together.” Backhouse said there was a strong push to cut costs in every area, from the “carrying of spares for aircrafts right through the training of pilots”.

While Qantas grounded its six remaining A380s, pending the outcome of inspections, the carrier immediately played down the incident. Qantas CEO Alan Joyce described as “not significant” reports that some

tyres on the Qantas plane had burst on landing.

Joyce also attempted to deflect reports that Qantas had been alerted to problems with Trent 900 engines by the European Aviation Safety Authority (EASA) on August 4. The EASA “airworthiness directive” warned of “wear beyond engine manual limits” that “could lead to loss of engine performance with the potential for in-flight shutdown” and “potentially unsafe conditions”. On November 5 the CEO said that the company had received the EASA directive, but claimed that such warnings were “not uncommon”.

Qantas ignored other recent warning signals involving planes fitted with Rolls-Royce Trent 900 engines. Two months ago, a Lufthansa A380 had to shut down one of its four engines shortly before landing at Frankfurt because of concerns about oil pressure. In September, a Singapore Airlines A380 leaving Paris was forced to turn back, due to an engine malfunction.

Even before inspections began, Qantas stated that its A380s could return to service within 24 to 48 hours. Management revised that estimate on Monday, after inspections revealed “anomalies” in three engines, including oil leaks in the turbine area. The inspections indicated that the engines “were not operating within normal tolerances”. Nevertheless, Qantas insisted “it should be days and not weeks” before the planes were declared fit to fly.

Qantas’s handling of the incident shows that its overriding concern is not for the safety of passengers and crew, but for its profit line. The carrier’s A380 fleet was carrying 17 percent of Qantas’s international passengers. The company is estimated to be losing \$20 million every week that the planes remain out of service.

Similar considerations no doubt lay behind Singapore Airlines’s initial decision to keep its eleven A380s flying last week, declaring inspections had not turned up “anything of concern”. On November 10, however, the airline was forced to ground three A380s after oil stains were detected in the engines. Lufthansa is continuing to fly its A380s, despite removing an engine from one plane.

Qantas adamantly rejected any suggestion that the A380 explosion was connected to problems with its maintenance programs. Instead, it attempted to shift the focus solely onto Rolls Royce, declaring: “We believe that this is a material failure or some sort of design failure”. The denial came in response to statements by Australian Licensed Aircraft Engineers Association (ALAEA) federal secretary Steven Purvinas that outsourcing maintenance and inspections overseas had

seriously undermined safety on Qantas aircraft.

While the carrier is certainly anxious to avoid a spotlight being placed on maintenance cost-cutting and restructuring, Purvinas’s allegations deflect from the real reason for the decline in safety standards, not only at Qantas but right across the airline industry. His stance also undermines the development of a unified struggle by airline workers in every country to fight the destruction of jobs and conditions, and to defend safety.

Amid intensifying competition between the world’s airlines, which has sharpened since the global financial crisis, engineers and maintenance workers are under constant management pressure to speed-up work and cut corners to keep aircraft flying at all costs. Just this week, the ALAEA revealed that Qantas had stood down six engineers in Australia for searching for “plane defects that they had not been asked to check”.

Like its counterparts, Qantas has engaged in savage cutbacks, resulting in a compromising of safety standards. In 2006, it launched a \$3 billion cost-cutting plan, including the closure of its heavy-engineering maintenance facility in Sydney at the cost of 480 highly-skilled jobs. In the 10 months to April last year, Qantas slashed 3,340 jobs, or almost 10 percent of its 34,000 workforce, including 2,750 operational jobs. Around 1,500 full-time long-haul jobs had been slashed during previous downsizings.

Engineers responsible for inspecting the safety and airworthiness of the Qantas fleet have revealed that the cuts have led to rostering and call-in regimes that produce high levels of fatigue. One report claimed that engineers were often called in to respond to complex engineering issues and approve critical aircraft maintenance tasks with less than five hours’ sleep between jobs.

The serious safety incidents involving Qantas aircraft since 2006, including engine failures, tyre blowouts and landing gear malfunctions, indicate that a catastrophic disaster is just a matter of time.



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