

# Risks of air travel neglected by FAA

By Vance Hartke

YOU ARE quite literally taking your life into your hands every time you board a passenger airliner—and paying for the somewhat dubious privilege.

There is no doubt that the aviation industry must shoulder some of the blame for the tremendous and terrifying lack of aviation safety, since it is the industry which balks at any proposed safety measure that would be an inconvenience or cut into its profits.

However, I believe the lion's share of the blame for conditions which exist today must be assumed by the Federal Aviation Administration [FAA], a governmental organization charged with the responsibility for the safety of thousands of American air travelers every month.

THE SIMPLE fact, as the record shows, is that the FAA has not effectively discharged its responsibility. Moreover, my investigation makes me

certain that FAA officials have not even tried to do so.

Some Capitol Hill newsmen say I have "declared war" on the FAA. That is not so. I am merely doing my job as a United States senator and a member of the Senate aviation subcommittee by investigating reports of gross neglect by the FAA in the area of aviation safety.

As my study proceeds, I am learning some frightening things, most of which are not generally known by the flying public. For example:

- Contrary to FAA regulations, commercial airliners loaded with paying passengers often carry vast quantities of extremely dangerous cargo. I am referring now to acids, other chemicals and radioactive materials.

It is inconceivable that the FAA is unaware of these violations, since accidents have been reported. During recent months, one load of chemicals exploded while the aircraft was on the loading ramp—only minutes before it began taking on passengers.

- Despite the large number of air tragedies that have been attributed officially to carelessness or lack of skill on the part of private pleasure pilots, FAA regulations still permit students to obtain their pilots' licenses with a minimum of 35 hours' flight training.

There now are some 750,000 licensed private pilots in the U. S., and a significant percentage of them have been licensed after only the minimum training period.

- The FAA-controlled system of ensuring that pilots—particularly those in passenger aircraft—are physically and psychologically fit is a disgrace.

Some FAA-appointed Aviation Medical Examiners, private physicians who are paid by the pilots they examine, are running certification mills. Commercial pilots must be examined at least once a year to stay in the air.

One doctor, according to FAA records, examined a total of 3,000 pilots during 1971. I cannot believe those examinations were very thoro. Another 23 examiners certified an aggregate total of 18,000 pilots during the same year.

So what have we got? We have reported incidents of passenger aircraft pilots dying at the controls, the passengers being brought in safely by the copilot.

in 1966, a chartered aircraft crashed at Ardmore, Okla., killing 83 persons. The National Transportation Safety Board [NTSB], which investigates all air disasters, attributed the crash to the death of the pilot by heart attack.

- Another disgrace is the FAA's refusal to upgrade its requirements for operation of charter air services. This is only one recommendation by FAA safety experts which has been ignored.

Often, when a charter flight crashes, the cause is listed as pilot error—with contributory factors such as the aircraft being overloaded by several thousand pounds, or the pilot not having flown for several years. This is not my opinion; this is a matter of record at the NTSB.

- Passengers on commercial airliners have survived crashes. Others, when the crash was followed by fire, have been labeled death due to smoke poisoning. The fact is that many of those may have died of poison gas—cyanide gas, specifically.

This was pointed out by the Cook County coroner's office recently after autopsies were performed on 54 victims of two crashes in which other passengers survived.

According to the autopsy reports, at least seven passengers, and possibly 10, who died could have lived. They died of cyanide gas poisoning.

The Air Line Pilots' Association tells us that cyanide poisoning is not looked for during autopsies of victims unless specifically requested and such requests have been rare. We cannot know, then, how many "smoke victims" were actually gassed to death.

Is the FAA aware that some materials in the interiors of passenger aircraft emit poison gases when subjected to heat and flame? You bet it is!

In 1969, the National Bureau of Standards conducted laboratory tests of various materials and submitted its findings regarding cyanide gas and other poisons—at the request of the FAA.

With that report in its hands for nearly four years, the FAA still has taken no action to eliminate the dangerous materials.

Philip I. Ryther, a FAA safety expert for some 15 years, headed a study group which was extremely critical of air safety and submitted a report to that effect in early 1970. When he pressed for action on the group's recommended improvements, he was hounded into early retirement.

Ryther has told my investigators that of the more than 5,000 air fatalities in the last three years, "more than half" could still be alive if those recommendations had been adopted by the FAA.

BUT WHETHER we are talking about 2,500 people, or 25 people, they are Americans who have lost their lives. And I accuse the FAA of responsibility for those deaths.

I now am seeking a full-scale investigation into this situation by the Senate Commerce Committee's subcommittee on aviation, an independent probe into FAA operations and activities by the General Accounting Office.

If the facts warrant such actions, I will seek a complete reorganization of the Federal Aviation Administration--starting at the very highest levels and working downward.