

House Unit Brands F.A.A. As Sluggish on Air Safety

By RICHARD WITKIN

A House committee that conducted a nine-month study of air hazards accused the Federal Aviation Administration yesterday of avoiding leadership and showing signs of "sluggishness which at times approaches an attitude of indifference to public safety."

The Special Subcommittee on Investigations said that the agency had "needlessly and unjustifiably put at risk" thousands of lives by failing to deal properly with dangers of the DC-10 for almost two years.

The F.A.A. began adopting stronger measures only after a McDonnell Douglas DC-10 crashed near Paris last March. The death toll of 346 was the largest in aviation history.

In a 245-page report, the House group also charged the Federal agency with "foot-dragging" in allowing a long delay before ordering airliners to be equipped with a cockpit warning device designed to prevent the most common type of accident—one in which the crew inadvertently flies a properly functioning plane into a hilltop or unpaved terrain short of the runway.

The most recent case was the crash Dec. 1 of a Boeing 727 into a hillside west of Washington. Ninety-two persons died in that crash. Four

days later, the F.A.A. said that it would require installation of the warning device on all planes by next Dec. 1.

In a development yesterday, the head of the F.A.A., Alexander P. Butterfield, announced two actions, prompted primarily by the DC-10 and 727 tragedies.

The first action called for centralizing in Washington the jobs now done by field offices in certifying new planes as fit to fly and in overseeing design improvements later on.

The move was in line with a recommendation of an in-house F.A.A. inquiry board that looked into the agency's role in the DC-10 disaster.

The board's long-secret mid-April report, highlights of which were reported in The New York Times yesterday, accused the agency of "questionable" actions in certifying the jumbo jet and with being "ineffective" in taking corrective measures after a near-crash in 1972.

Mr. Butterfield's second action was the issuance of a so-called "notice to airmen." It advised pilots not to leave the last altitude assigned by traffic controllers until certain that their position over the ground and the minimum altitudes pub-

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lished on their charts permitted further descent.

Pilots Blamed Controllers

After the 727 crash west of the capital, the pilots' association said that F.A.A. controllers had given improper directions to the crew. The latest notice to airmen was obviously intended to underscore the agency's position that the pilot had ultimate responsibility for the safety of his plane.

Some safety experts had hoped that the F.A.A. might go further in clearing up any vagueness in the rules by ordering controllers to volunteer more instructions on what altitude to maintain.

Mr. Butterfield had no comment on the indictment of his agency by the House committee.

The committee, whose chair-

man is Representative Harley C. Staggers, Democrat of West Virginia, said that there was a tendency in the F.A.A. to view its twin jobs of promoting the industry and insuring safety as "competing interests to be balanced off against each other."

It said that this was wrong, that decisions compromising safety in favor of short-term economic gains "do not serve the real economic interests in the aviation industry."

The committee said also that it had found symptoms of "hardening of the arteries" in the aviation agency.

"Administrative delay and inactivity is bad in any agency," the committee added. "In the case of the F.A.A., it may literally endanger human life. Instances of completely inappropriate bureaucratic slowness to act, and inaction, are noted throughout this report."

'Undesirable Tendency'

Another criticism was directed at both the F.A.A. and the

aviation industry. The committee said that it had found an "undesirable tendency" by both to rely "on the human factor instead of a mechanical solution to correct a safety problem."

To illustrate, it cited measures taken after the near-crash of a DC-10 that lost a cargo door over Windsor, Ontario, in June, 1972. The first measure taken was to install a viewing port through which a crewman could verify that the door was solidly locked. A little later, steps were undertaken to change the locking system mechanically.

It was the similar loss of a cargo door that caused the tragedy near Paris. This door had the peep hole, but a vital mechanical "fix" had somehow been omitted.

In its recommendations, the committee made clear that it was not completely satisfied that the cargo-door system was safe despite the numerous technical improvements made to it. A thorough reconsideration of the basic design was proposed.

An Exploration Urged

The committee also called on the F.A.A. to explore the need for improving all DC-10's, and other jumbo jets as well, to make sure that their passenger floors would not collapse in the event that hole was made in the fuselage by loss of a door, a bomb blast or any other mishap. In both DC-10 incidents, the floor did collapse, severely damaging the control cables. In the Paris case, this was fatal.

The manufacturer, McDonnell Douglas, plans to solve this problem on all planes to be delivered starting late next year by installing a system of pressure vents and strengthening the floor. It says that it is discussing with a number of airlines the idea of making the changes retroactively. But it insists this is not really an overriding issue for the DC-10, maintaining that the plane now is as safe as any other airliner.