

First Anniversary of Grand Canyon Air Crash Notes Progress Made in Safety

128 persons were killed in the crash of two Douglas C-54 aircraft on July 1, 1956, over the Grand Canyon. The crash was the deadliest in the history of the United States aviation industry.

By ROBERT J. STERLING
United Press Correspondent

One year ago Saturday, two giant airliners bisected an angle of death over the Grand Canyon. In a few sickening seconds 128 lives were snuffed out in history's worst commercial aviation disaster.

In the length of time it takes a football team to run off a play, two magnificent transport planes were smashed into twisted rubble.

And a stunned nation was made suddenly aware of a gigantic air safety problem.

Grand Canyon was the "impossible" accident.

The airliners collided in reasonably clear weather, at a high altitude and in literally empty air space.

The lesson was grimly clear: If it could happen over the Grand Canyon it was far more likely to happen again in the congested air approaches to the big cities.

10 Months of Investigation

The Civil Aeronautics board spent almost 10 months investigating why Transworld Airline's super-Constellation and United Airline's DC-7 collided.

In its final report the CAB said the "probable cause was that the pilots did not see each other in time"—which was like saying the collision was accidental.

But the CAB went on to list a number of factors that singly or in combination may have "blinded" the pilots. These included:

- Limited cockpit visibility.
- Intervening clouds that prevented the pilots from seeing the other aircraft in time to maneuver away.
- Preoccupation with normal cockpit duties.
- Physiological limits to human vision.
- Insufficiency of en route air traffic advisory information due to inadequate facilities and lack of personnel in air traffic control.
- Preoccupation with unrelated cockpit duties such as trying to provide passengers with a more scenic view of the canyon.

Factors Discarded

This possible sightseeing factor has been discarded by most air safety experts because of the altitude (21,000 feet) and the clouds and haze present.

But the other suggested factors added up to an indictment of the air traffic system as it existed on June 30, 1956.

The TWA and United planes came together because their pilots didn't see each other in time—but that visual failure was merely the culmination of many weaknesses in the system under which the airmen were operating.

Both planes were flying "off-airways"—in air space uncontrolled by federal traffic control centers. This was because the controlled airways were not as direct. But in choosing to fly the uncontrolled routes, the pilots were made solely responsible for avoiding any other traffic.

The TWA plane, originally assigned a lower altitude, had been given permission to climb 1,000 feet above the clouds. In doing so, he had to reach 21,000 feet—the assigned altitude of United's DC-7. TWA was told that United was at that altitude but the undermanned ATC centers along the route were too busy to warn United. The centers had their hands full monitoring traffic on controlled airways; they could not accept responsibility for planes in uncontrolled air space.

Deadly Pattern Set

Thus, the deadly pattern was set. Insufficient federal airways, inadequate air traffic control facilities and personnel, obsolete regulations that ignored the visual handicaps of pilots, and two airliners unknowingly approaching their fatal rendezvous at 300 miles an hour.

That was Grand Canyon one year ago Saturday. Has anything been done about those conditions in the 12 months since?

These are the positive accomplishments:

1. As quickly as possible the airlines are shifting to instrument flight rules both at high altitudes and in the more congested airways. All carriers have voluntarily gone to "positive separation" for all flights above 18,000 feet, which means they must fly on federally-designated airways under the monitoring and guidance of air traffic control centers.

Effective July 1, every flight above 9,500 feet in the heavily-travelled "golden triangle" between New York, Washington and Chicago, must fly IFR in controlled air space. And eventually, every commercially-scheduled flight will be IFR from takeoff to landing.

2. The Civil Aeronautics Administration, which operates the air traffic control system, is almost ready to control all civil and military flights above 24,000 feet. By next January this floor will be lowered to 15,000 feet. CAA has increased the number of one-way airways, particularly between New York-Washington and New York-Chicago. It also has designated 12 direct transcontinental "super-skyways" for safe separation and control of coast-to-coast high-speed flights, including the forthcoming jets.

Five-Year Expansion

3. CAA, with congressional blessing, has compressed its original five-year expansion of the federal airways system into three years, and stepped up spending on this system from \$246 million to at least \$810 million.

More Equipment

4. From June 30, 1956, to last May 30, CAA added nearly 7,000 miles of electronically-monitored airways to its system. It put into commission millions of dollars worth of radio and radar equipment both along the airways and at airports themselves. It also recruited 2,200 new air traffic controllers and spent \$9 million on 23 long-range radar sets with first deliveries scheduled for August.

5. CAA in the past 12 months has spent another \$9 million on improved communications equipment for more efficient voice

traffic between pilots and controllers.

6. CAA has revised its regulations to cut down the visual flight rules under which pilots must bear complete responsibility for avoiding other traffic. IFR is now given pilots only when they request it; formerly CAA controllers initiated IFR restrictions.

7. Both CAA and the airlines, with pilots' cooperation, are restricting the "1,000 on top" clearances which played a role in the Grand Canyon crash. Pilots must now fly at least 2,000 feet above the clouds.

8. Congress and the aviation industry have been handed a massive blueprint for future handling of air traffic, drawn up by President Eisenhower's special aviation facilities planning commission. It calls for a temporary three-year airways modernization board which would set new air traffic control systems and equipment. It details elaborate future plans for traffic control at major airports and recommends a new, completely independent federal aviation agency.

These are the positive accomplishments that followed Grand Canyon. But they do not give the whole picture.

Air Force Demands Ban

Some of the government's airways expansion plans have been blocked by conflicts with the military over use of air space. Sen. A. S. (Mike) Monroney (D-Okla.) warned recently that military "encroachment" of civilian air space may warrant a congressional investigation.

For example, CAA plans to establish a direct, controlled airway across the Grand Canyon which would be used by commercial airlines. The controversy is still being thrashed out. As of now the CAA's proposed 12 super-skyways for transcontinental flights are being threatened by the military blocking out sections for air training and gunnery practice.

During the recent gavel maneuvers which President Eisenhower witnessed off the Virginia coast, airlines were forced to detour more than 200 flights in a 27-hour period.

—Despite the current drive toward safer air traffic control, near-misses take place daily. A recent report to Congress revealed that aircraft are involved in two near-misses a day while flying over densely populated areas. The Civil Aeronautics Board reported 452 near-collisions in the last four months of 1956—101 of them occurring over the largest metropolitan areas.

—Last month, the aviation industry itself ruefully admitted that two years of research have failed to develop anti-collision warning devices. Nearly 70 companies have been trying to perfect anti-collision or proximity warning equipment without success.

Could Grand Canyon happen again?

Chances Believed Reduced

Government and aviation industry officials believe the chances have been reduced considerably, thanks to better control of high-flying traffic and

the virtual elimination of visual flight rules for such planes.

But the collision danger itself is still haunting pilots and airline executives. Traffic in congested airport areas gets heavier by the day. And no matter how much improved control goes into commercial airline operations, there is no present way to keep military and private aircraft out of the way all the time.

Many of the reported near-misses have involved military and private planes brushing close to airliners, with the former's presence unsuspected by air traffic control centers.

The future blueprint mapped by White House air safety planners would lump all military, commercial and private planes under a single control system. But the target date for this blueprint is 1975—and as one veteran pilot puts it, "a lot of collisions can take place in the next few years."

Grand Canyon accomplished two major goals:

It galvanized Congress into voting funds for which federal aviation agencies and the airlines had been pleading for years.

It also resulted in some badly-

needed government-industry cooperation in solving air traffic problems.

Like virtually every air crash, it taught some lessons and drove home old ones—for which 128 persons had to die.

Like every air accident, it cannot be summed up in mere statistics. It touched hundreds of homes with personal tragedy that a short year has failed to ease. The families of the dead pilots, for example, are still living on the West Coast. They are reasonably well-off financially, although one of the companies had to take up a collection to pay off a co-pilot's mortgage.

Three damage suits totaling a half-million dollars have been filed against the government and

the two airlines. More are expected, now that the CAB's final report has been published.

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Search Continues For G.P. Youngster

Grants Pass—State police and Josephine county deputies continued their search today for Cheryl Lea Johnston, 5, missing since Saturday afternoon.

Some 1500 volunteer searchers turned out Sunday but found no trace of the blonde child with the pony tail who disappeared while picnicking near the river.

The Grants Pass girl is the daughter of Mrs. Maxine Johnston. She and 10 other children were taken to Mattson park, seven miles downstream from Grants Pass, Saturday with the permission of their parents.

Authorities said several of the older children in the party were splashing in the river about one half mile downstream from its confluence with the Applegate river. Cheryl was picking up pebbles and carrying them to a picnic table from the river when last seen.

Searchers turned out in droves and at 2 a.m. Saturday there were still an estimated 500 persons with flashlights and lanterns combing the heavily wooded country along the river.

Man Dies in Fire At Walla Walla Hotel

Walla Walla—Richard E. Herndon, 63, died in a fire which swept the Columbia hotel here early Sunday.

Virgil Carrigan and Emmett Bradley were reported in critical condition in a local hospital with burns and four others were treated for minor injuries.

The blaze broke out about 4 a.m. Herndon, a laborer, had lived many years in the Walla Walla and Milton-Freewater, Ore., area.

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