

The consequences of commercial pressure can be fatal



By John Barrass



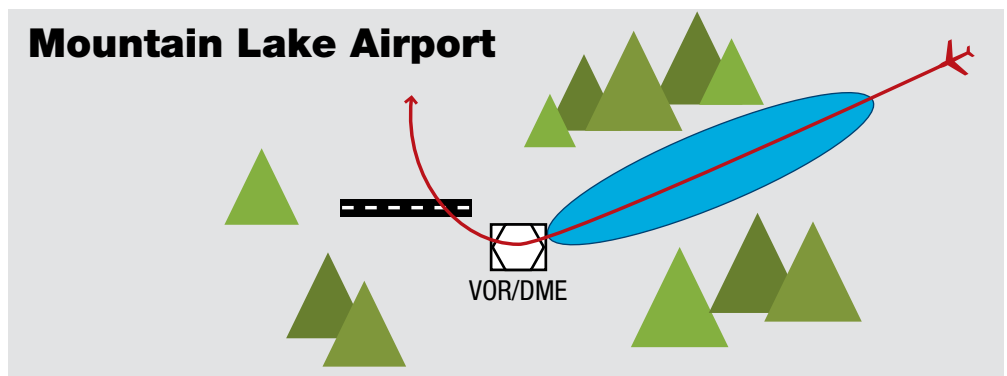
John Barrass served for 20 years in the UK Royal Air Force and Canadian Forces in a variety of flying, instructional, and command appointments. Now an established

aviation consultant, John is the current editor of SKYbrary.

A few years ago now, a young flight safety manager came to ask for my advice. He wanted to know if there were statistics available which showed how often aircraft diverted from any given airport. He wanted to see if he could demonstrate that aircraft from his airline diverted less often than other airlines. I wasn't able to help much but I was intrigued to know why he wanted this data. This is his story, a story of how commercial pressure can influence safety culture in a negative way with disastrous consequences. The story is true but has been altered to protect the source.

The airline operated a small number of aircraft from a regional airport in the mountains which we shall call "Mountain Lakes". The airline operated a number of different types but, because of the performance challenges of operating into Mountain Lakes, all of the aircraft based there were of the same type and were not found anywhere else in the airline. Many of the pilots had been with the airline for a long time, had set up home in Mountain Lakes, and had no wish to be based anywhere else.

The only instrument approach to Mountain Lakes was a VOR/DME approach over a lake. The minimum descent height was 500 feet, and in the event of a missed approach there was a challenging procedure which took the aircraft back to the hold, avoiding quite high surrounding terrain. The missed approach procedure was reviewed and it was decided, for obstacle clearance reasons to raise the minimum descent height to 800 feet. The crews complied with the new procedures.



One evening, an experienced pilot descended on the approach to 800 feet, failed to see the ground and diverted to a nearby larger airport. The passengers were then carried by bus to Mountain Lakes, a journey of three hours. The CEO of the airline received numerous calls from irate passengers complaining about the bus journey and he reacted angrily, dismissing the pilot concerned. Over the months that followed this event, there were no diversions. The CEO was pleased to hear that his airline had a reputation for getting into Mountain Lakes when competitors diverted. The young flight safety officer believed that pilots were flying below minimums in order to avoid diverting, because they were frightened of losing their jobs.

There was a twist to the tale. When I asked the pilot how sure he was that this was the case, he told me that recently he had flown as a co-pilot into Mountain Lakes and, when the aircraft came to the minimum descent point, the

captain put his finger to his lips to signify silence, and continued to descend to the "old" MDH of 500 feet, whereupon they became visual with the airfield and landed without incident. I asked him if he had reported the incident; he had but his complaint had not been well received and he had been told to "mind his own business". A more experienced flight safety officer, with support from the airline management, might have been able to challenge this attitude but the young man was also concerned about his job. He therefore decided to try to highlight the existence of the problem to authorities indirectly, without it being obvious that he was the source of the information – hence the analysis of diversion data. He did not succeed.

Why would pilots do this? Well, these were a capable group of pilots, very familiar with the terrain around Mountain Lakes, who were also very familiar with local weather phenomena. When put under commercial pressure, and you can't get much more pressure than the threat of losing your job, the pilots considered the situation pragmatically. It had always been safe to fly to 500 feet in the past, and the reasons for raising the MDH to 800 feet were, they considered, not entirely justified. They therefore started to use, unofficially, a MDH of 500 feet. There were fewer diversions, the CEO was happy, and nobody felt they were doing anything unsafe.

But things change. What can start as a safely managed if unofficial operating procedure becomes, over time, no procedure at all. Why stop at 500 feet if the MDH is 800 feet? Over time, the logic of the argument to continue below MDH was lost on many of those involved. The issues were not discussed and the airline management were unaware of this now unsafe practice. Disaster occurred when one of these pilots flew an approach in bad weather at an unfamiliar airfield. He descended below MDH without comment from either pilot and hit a hill. The accident report talks about Controlled Flight Into Terrain, but this was more than yet another CFIT accident, it was also a consequence of commercial pressure and a poor airline safety culture.

I would hope that this story that I have recounted is extreme but there are numerous anecdotes that suggest that, in small ways, pilots are often put under undue commercial pressure. An example is the programming of flight schedules which can barely be achieved in the crew duty day; a technical problem, slight delays in loading, traffic delays all conspire to create a situation where the pilot is under pressure to extend

the crew day. One pilot told me that he was often asked by ops staff, when flying a notoriously tight schedule, to extend his crew day - as he put it "extending the crew day is a matter for my discretion NOT the dispatcher".

Efficiency and profitability can be achieved without compromising safety; it's just a matter of professionalism, imagination, a culture of safety, and leadership from the top of the organisation. Passing commercial pressure onto the people engaged in the safety critical functions of an operation can be all too convenient for management and commercial staff; awareness of this needs to be acknowledged and actively discouraged.

Keeping an airline operation profitable, especially in difficult economic times, is a real challenge. Everyone in the company needs to work together to ensure that the operation is efficient. Commercial awareness is of course important; pilots need to factor commercial considerations into their decision making always and maintain a safe operation; it is not easy to get the balance right.