

McConnell: That airplane you're on, is it safe?



GREG MCCONNELL

[More from Greg McConnell \(HTTP://OTTAWACITIZEN.COM/AUTHOR/GREG-MCCONNELL\)](http://ottawacitizen.com/author/greg-mcconnell)

Published on: August 26, 2016 | Last Updated: August 26, 2016 9:34 AM EDT



SAN FRANCISCO, CA - JUNE 10: A United Airlines plane sits on the tarmac at San Francisco International Airport on June 10, 2015 in San Francisco, California. The Canadian Federal Pilots Association is questioning safety regimes

surrounding airlines in Canada. JUSTIN SULLIVAN / GETTY IMAGES

Holiday travellers need to know about an obscure Transportation Safety Board report released earlier this year into the causes of a medical evacuation helicopter crash four years ago that left four people dead.

Amazingly, the investigation of the crash concluded that Canada's aviation safety regulator was asleep at the switch.

Transport Canada was aware of the problems that led to the crash but has stripped away its safety oversight systems and staff so much that it was unable to respond.

Could this be happening with other airlines that deliver hundreds of thousands of holiday and business travellers every year?

You betcha.



(<http://wpmedia.ottawacitizen.com/2016/08/0825-mcconnell-quote.jpg?quality=55&strip=all>)

The same approach condemned as a failure in the Ornge helicopter crash

is used to oversee every other aviation company in Canada.

“The purpose of regulatory oversight is to encourage companies to be proactive, while intervening when necessary to ensure, at a minimum, regulatory compliance,” said the crash investigators.

The only problem is Transport Canada long ago abandoned the tools and training inspectors need to force regulatory compliance, even though 90 per cent of commercial aviation in Canada is not required to adopt Safety Management Systems (SMS).

With the introduction of aviation SMS – the same system Transport Canada relies upon to keep railways safe – the key components of its proven surveillance program have systematically dismantled by Transport Canada.

Canada’s aviation safety regulator has grounded the pilots who work as aviation inspectors, causing their qualifications to atrophy, preventing them from staying current with rapidly changing aviation technology and cutting their training at the same time. There have never been fewer fully trained pilots whose qualifications are current and up to date working as aviation inspectors.

So even though inspectors routinely know about safety violations before incidents happen, and they inform their supervisors, inspectors are not provided the tools, training and mandate to do anything to prevent problems from turning into serious, even fatal incidents.

For the victims of the Air Ornge crash and their families, one of whom has just launched legal action against Transport Canada, this will come as cold comfort.

Aviation SMS is not intended to be a stand-alone buffer against safety failure and never was. This makes perfect sense. Redundancy is an important principle in safety; when one system fails, another is in place to ensure nothing bad happens.

Yet today, aviation SMS is pretty much the sole safety program, as Transport Canada has all but abandoned direct operational oversight of airlines.

We seldom, if ever, conduct no-notice inspections, ramp checks, pilot check rides and other activities that once gave us a window into the state of safety of an airline. Commercial air operators in Canada can go for as long as five years without a single SMS assessment. That's far too long and well beyond the international requirement for yearly inspections.

The investigation into the Ornge helicopter crash recommended that Transport Canada make Safety Management Systems mandatory for the vast majority of companies for whom it is only voluntary, and that the regulator conduct regular SMS assessments to evaluate the capability of operators to effectively manage safety.

The Transportation Safety Board also urges Transport Canada to beef up its safety oversight, inspector training, frequency of inspections and enforcement action to bring aviation companies into compliance.

These are excellent ideas for public safety, but it would require a doubling of licensed pilot inspectors and reinstate direct operational oversight with inspectors looking under the hood of aircraft and regular no-notice inspections.

Transport Minister Marc Garneau is duty-bound to respond to these crucial safety recommendations.

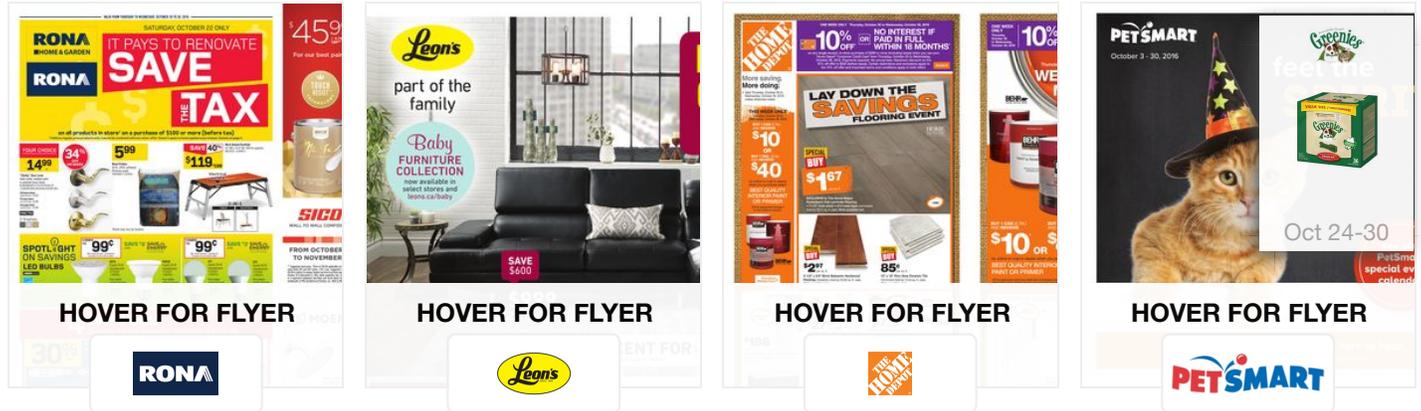
Since the summer of 2013, following the disaster that leveled Lac Mégantic, policymakers have understandably been focused on rail safety.

But, after a decade of cuts to aviation safety oversight under the previous government, the travelling public can only hope that Garneau takes concrete action to make sure the gaps in aviation safety are closed.

If he does not act, it is only a matter of time before an aviation disaster on the scale of Lac Mégantic occurs.

Greg McConnell is national chair of the Canadian Federal Pilots Association, which represents the licensed pilots who work for Transport Canada as aviation inspectors.

Ottawa Flyers



Comments

We encourage all readers to share their views on our articles and blog posts. We are committed to maintaining a lively but civil forum for discussion, so we ask you to avoid personal attacks, and please keep your comments relevant and respectful. If you encounter a comment that is abusive, click the "X" in the upper right corner of the comment box to report spam or abuse. We are using Facebook commenting. Visit our FAQ page (<http://www.ottawacitizen.com/news/story.html?id=7195492>) for more information.