



OPINION: TRAGIC DRONE STRIKE WITH PLANE 'INEVITABLE'

News / Airlines



It now seems inevitable that a tragic accident involving a commercial plane with hundreds aboard and a drone is only a matter of time.

The numbers are troubling with the British Airways encounter Sunday just the tip of the iceberg.

Officials: Drone apparently slams into plane

Last year, in the United Kingdom alone there was a quadrupling of near misses to 23 in the six month period from April to October with 12 labeled as a serious risk of collision, according to the U.K.'s Airprox Board.

In a five-month period ending January 31 this year, the U.S. Federal Aviation Administration reported that there were 583 near misses between drones and planes, more than triple the number in 2014.

The U.S. Center for the Study of the Drone at Bard College tempers the FAA report saying there is some duplication but it agrees a number of 519, of which 188 or 36.2% were close encounters.

Again, they are troubling numbers as it appears that drone users are ignoring the globally

accepted rules of not operating above 400 feet and not within five miles of an airport.

The Center's report on the FAA numbers said that "three out of five incidents occurred within five miles of an airport, and nine out of 10 incidents occurred above 400 feet."

And in 24 incidents, drones came within 50 feet of a manned aircraft, and in 11 cases the pilots of the aircraft made evasive maneuvers to avoid a drone.

According to the data, 91.9% of the incidents occurred above 400 feet with the average altitude 3,074 feet.

Disturbing trend

While these numbers are disturbing they are only going to get worse as drone sales soar on the back of lower purchase costs and greater capability.

Non-military drones are typically capable of altitudes of up to 6,000 feet and speeds of 50 miles per hour (mph) and they are selling in the hundreds of thousands.

The U.S. is one of the few countries that requires registration at a cost of \$5 — and 400,000 have been registered on a new FAA site launched last December.

The UK and Australia do not require registration, although both countries have the same basic rules of banning flying at altitude of above 400 feet and not within five miles and an airport.

Regulators concede they have been slow to act and some privately admit the situation is almost out of control.

While regulators around the world are grappling with the new drone phenomena, responsible manufactures such as China's DJI have introduced geofencing technology into its drones to prevent them being flown into hazardous areas.

Chinese firm DJI leads new 'drone age'

DJI also has a feature Geospatial Environment Online (GEO) which provides drone users with up-to-date guidance on locations where flights may be restricted by regulations or raised safety or security concerns.

This could include forest fires, major stadium events, and VIP travel.

While this works well for the responsible operator hacks are already available online to work around the restrictions for those who flout the rules.

And that is the problem without global mandatory registration for owners and severe penalties the irresponsible operator will continue to pose a serious threat to aviation.

More and more we are seeing these drones being operated around major airports.

At New York's JFK airport in January a Jetblue A320 pilot reported a near miss with a drone at about 6000ft, while a Southwest 737 pilot reported one passing just below his aircraft as it came into land at Baltimore.

In September last year a drone came within 60 feet of a 70-seat EMB170 jet in the skies above the British Houses of Parliament.

Last month the captain of a Lufthansa A380 super jumbo reported that a drone nearly collided with his aircraft as it approached Los Angeles airport. According to the FAA the encounter occurred at 5,000 feet and the drone came within 200 feet.

With air travel set to double over the next 20 years and drones sales climbing by 30% a year, tragic conflicts with reckless operators are inevitable.

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