

File Name: d:\10 - senate enquiries\2012 - senate nov [pelair]\2015\bernie curral information.doc

Date of Document: 3rd March 2015

Wednesday, March 4, 2015

Plane Talking

CASA caught playing the man not the company in ABC TV exposé on Pel-Air ditching

<http://blogs.crikey.com.au/planetalking/2012/09/03/casa-caught-playing-the-man-not-the-company-in-abc-tv-expose-on-pel-air-ditching/>

<http://www.abc.net.au/4corners/stories/2012/08/30/3579404.htm>

Ben Sandilands | Sep 03, 2012 10:55PM | EMAIL | PRINT

The ABC TV 4 Corners report into the Norfolk Island Pel-Air ditching has this evening shown CASA's director of safety, John McCormick, making an attack on the flight's captain, Dominic James and excusing every single deficiency the regulator uncovered in the company during a safety audit as not being a cause of the accident.

However the program is also posting online the safety audit that CASA tried to keep secret and which materially contradicts McCormick in that the safety regulator he heads found among many things that Pel-Air was in breach of the safety rules and was inadequate in its management of fatigue.

The interview and the audit read side by side support the program's opening premise that CASA scapegoated James in preference to carrying out its obligations under law to pursue the company.

McCormick would well know, and has insisted before the Senate Inquiry into pilot training and airline safety, that it is the airlines or operators that are responsible for safety outcomes.

As pilot James said near the end of the program, he was the pilot of a company that was being overseen by a regulator. Last night, on national television, the head of CASA unloaded all the blame for the accident on a pilot who had not even slept properly for two nights, and was employed by an operator that was so poorly overseen by CASA that it uncovered massive safety deficiencies, while benefiting from a defective CASA rule that excused it from operating as an air ambulance without sufficient fuel to fly to an alternate airport if for any reason a remote refueling airport in the middle of the ocean was rendered unavailable by bad weather.

McCormick's performance and statements on air are not only inconsistent with the body of law on airline or operator responsibility for pilot training and standards, but were manifestly unfair to the pilot, even though the pilot undoubtedly made serious mistakes in the preparation of the flight, its fueling, and in dealing with the available weather information as the Westwind jet approached Norfolk Island from Apia.

(The 4 Corners report by Geoff Thompson also uncovered evidence that critical weather information had not been passed on to James at a point where had he known of the real situation at Norfolk Island he would have diverted to Nadi in Fiji rather than passing the point of no return where he had to continue to the intended tech stop.)

A fair question arising from McCormick's performance is whether or not he is capable of taking direct public action against a high profile airline or operator other than Singapore owned Tiger Airways, given the severity of

a series of safety failures at Jetstar that were also declared to be unworthy of investigation by the ‘independent’ safety regulator the ATSB.

Regulatory matters aside, the human suffering caused by the unsafe operation of the air ambulance flight by Pel-Air was movingly documented by the program, as was the vigilance and determination of their rescuers on Norfolk Island that brought all six souls to safety from the wild and dark sea in which they had to tread water for close to 90 minutes.

It is utterly shameful to hear that Pel-Air has not once been in touch with Bernie Currall or her husband Gary since the accident, and to see the ruin and despair that the operator’s unsafe and negligent conduct brought to their lives, as well as to Karen Casey the nurse who has lost her livelihood and suffers continued pain from her injuries.

McCormick heads a safety regulator that approved the removal of special life rafts from Qantaslink turbo-props serving Lord Howe Island, and has been unable to release any safety case or statement as to why it allowed this to happen other than the downwards harmonization of Australian standards to the depths of world’s best practice.

It is also an organization that has never explained the safety case that saw it determine that the sort of aerial work performed by the Pel-Air flight didn’t need to carry enough fuel to make a diversion from an oceanic airstrip in bad weather, although it has only recently expressed an ‘intention’ to change a rule it should never have tolerated in the first instance.

The 4 Corners program is an indictment of shamefully deficient standards and oversight by our safety regulator, as well as its disposition to crucify a pilot rather than the company responsible for the flight and safety standards of its operations.

The program, and the supporting documentation, will be readily found on the ABC site in the near future.

COMMENTS: 1

NeoTheFatCat

Posted September 3, 2012 at 11:20 pm | [Permalink](#)

I watched the show and largely agree with your points.

However, the expertise and decisions of the person in charge are always the final link in the chain of causes that lead to disasters. In this case, James must have had some inkling of the management environment at Pel-Air. He knew he was lacking sleep and potentially operating with fatigue. He was responsible for the decisions he made, particularly where they were based on assumptions. There are probably a few more links that relate to his role, but my point is that he could have broken the chain himself at any point (eg. declare himself unfit).

In the end, the travelling public trusts that the person in charge has prepared themselves as fully as possible for what lies ahead, not just assumed that everyone has told her/him what he needs to know.

This is not to defame James or criticise him personally, just to point out that there is a chain – and sometimes the person in operational command is best placed to break that chain.

Finally, I agree that it is downright shameful to see how the people on board were treated. It is completely lacking in the basics of human decency that I would expect of any person, let alone a corporation.

2 CarlitosM Posted September 4, 2012 at 12:44 am | Permalink

So should we take this as your apology to the pilot then. It is very easy to run your mouth, write an opinionated blog, go with your “gut” and personal biases like it did happen just after the accident. Everyone’s an armchair captain.

Four Corners instead chose to do the hard work based on actual research and the truth, to take on figures of authority, questioning a dangerous regulatory climate where businesses always prioritise profit, while pretending to self police.

Next time you see a sensationalist story in the news about a doctor or nurse in a public hospital or a private retirement home, or a soldier speaking out, a minister’s staffer admitting a lie -for example with “kids overboard”, please report the real story: who is willing to stand up to their boss and say no, who will take on authority and blow the whistle.

Then, ask why and why not. And please ask why again, and again.

Once again, great journos and the real hard work from this Four Corners team shows what real Journalism can be. It puts most of the crap that passes for news these days to shame.

And quality investigative reporting like this can actually improve safety and make a huge difference to people’s lives. Shame on CASA, so let’s keep the spotlight on this story!

I do wonder what Albo has to say, he will surely have to act...

3 Itfisher Posted September 4, 2012 at 2:29 am | Permalink

Fair comment re declaring himself unfit but why no mention of the pressure brought to bear by the fact that this was no ‘regular’ flight...it was a medical evacuation with presumably a little more urgency than usual. In that situation surely it is incumbent on the operator to see that there is proper backup for the flight ie through backup flight crew, rather than risk an evacuation getting to a stage where the rescuers actually need rescuing.

And by the way congratulations to the ABC for making the program and providing the public with an insight into how some of our aviation regulators think.

4 CaptCB Posted September 4, 2012 at 7:38 am | Permalink

This was a serious transoceanic flight.

Pelair dispatched the crew on the mission.

Would things have been different if they had rostered a much more experienced Co-Pilot; one with an ATPL and the ability to cross check Dom’s flight plan? The challenges of this flight were vastly different to those of a normal flight around Australia and should have warranted a far greater degree of support from Pelair Flight Ops than was actually provided, including a Co Pilot who wasn’t a junior.

Would things have been different if Pelair planned for pilot fatigue and duty time?

Would things have been different if the Chief Pilot consulted with Dom in Apia cross checking his flight plan and wx? If Dom didn't have internet, why didn't Pelair fax the flight plan and wx to him?

Would things have been different if Dom had received the correct wx from Nadi (600', not 6000') and crucially, that Auckland ATC passed on the actual wx report 300' ceiling to him when the Unicom operator advised as such?

After the incident, it was the Chairman of Pelair who immediately hailed the pilot as a hero. Was this a classic spin doctor tactic; to elevate the pilot to the public to deflect attention on where it should have been, so he could then be devoured by a hungry media looking for a hero and for blood, in particular, that ridiculous 60 Minutes report?

The conduct of CASA and the ATSB borders on criminal.

As unfortunate as this incident was, it will probably be the catalyst to force much needed change in the way the regulator, accident investigator and the airline operators relate to each other.

This will no doubt save many lives in the future.

That is the good thing to come out of this incident.

Due credit should also be given to Dominic James for electing to remain silent on this matter until now, waiting until the ATSB report was released so he could finally comment on the 'facts' as discovered by the ATSB.

Dominic conducted himself professionally throughout the whole aftermath of this incident. Lesser men would have taken the easy option and succumbed to the media feeding frenzy. He demonstrated patience, professionalism and humility.

5 Scott Posted September 4, 2012 at 10:18 am | [Permalink](#)

I watched the program as well, and it seemed to me that the pilot was expecting a lot more support than he was given, so maybe there were deficiencies in some training areas and company operational support.

But ultimately, I agree with Neothefactcat.

Shouldn't a pilot be proactive in finding out weather conditions at his landing site, rather than just waiting to be informed (especially when they are receiving conflicting reports)? Shouldn't a pilot plan for the worst in regards to fuel and alternate landing sites, especially when flying in the South Pacific when runways are sparse and weather conditions are notoriously unpredictable?

6 Glen Posted September 4, 2012 at 3:24 pm | [Permalink](#)

Yep, but have you never made a mistake as a professional Scott? It happens. Systems are there to trap that, before it matters. They failed. Seems to me there is still a back story here ... something about low-bid cost pressures in contract aviation.

Carlitos: Haven't seen you here before, welcome. You can try, but I doubt that any amount of bold type is going to convince us that old Ben is anything but a hard worker. Maybe you should have gone with all caps?

7 CarlitosM Posted September 4, 2012 at 4:00 pm | [Permalink](#)

Whatever Glen. There's way too many armchair captains, bureaucrats and accountants having a say in this industry. Ben seems to like to point fingers and pass judgement ACA-style, more real analysis is what we need. Where are the pointy interviews with Albo, Rex and Pel-Air? Why? ;P

And still no apologies from all those too eager for an easy escape goat.

My intention was to pay some respect to journos that do their job well. Their efforts will save lives.

Crucial safety measures are being purposely reduced in efforts to fatten margins, this risk/benefit margin being eroded means accidents will certainly increase. In aviation these cost calculations mean that close shaves will become major incidents and a statistical certainty.

Such "operational" flexibility and lack of oversight in safety regs is common everywhere. Add the huge commercial pressures on the crews and pilots and we have many more dangerous examples overseas:

<http://www.pprune.org/rumours-news/491559-4-ryanair-aircraft-declare-fuel-emergency-same-time-17.html>

Let's talk about what systems need to improve, who has systemic responsibility for oversight and licensing: CASA heads must roll.

8 Lofi Posted September 4, 2012 at 5:03 pm | Permalink

@NeoTheFatCat – I agree, the pilot is ultimately responsible, even though systemic pressures may transpire to inhibit their independence. This is not to redirect blame from CASA and Pel-Air, but re-iterating pilot independence is a point always worth making.

While the pilot kept his views on the incident to himself, I'd say that was due to legal advice given his performance, not any attempt at professionalism. For an insight into his professionalism, I refer you to the contemporaneous attention he lapped up in his bizarre Cleo Batchelor of the Year nomination. It was tacky, deflective and cynical coming so soon after an event that nearly cost lives.

Although no more confirmation is required that Albanese is the archetypal egomaniacal, do-nothing, bully-boy politician who has zero to show for his portfolio, he should be watched closely over his response to the Pel-Air incident and CASA's report, and its own performance. There's alot wrong here.

9 Gary Currall Posted September 5, 2012 at 5:53 am | Permalink

the 4 corners programme was a revealing insight into the performance of the 4 groups that represented by safety on that awful night.

CASA was represented by Honest john mccormick, the director of safety!!! Someone should remind John that we are now in the 21st century and that really big aircraft have "fly by wire", cos like, back in the day we didn't need wires or software that would provide a consistent approach to fuel calculations. Honest john seemed incapable of understanding that safety, like technology, is evolving. he needs to move with the times as there is no longer any room for his "back of the fag packet" calculations.

The second group, Pel Air have according to the 4 Corners website, after 3 years, kindly offered all of the passengers financial assistance, on a without prejudice basis, so I won't be saying anything nasty about them. Isn't it funny how commercial interests can interfere with the truth?

The third group ATSB were represented by Sweaty Martin Dolan, the Chief Commissioner. I almost felt sorry for poor old Marty. Caught in the headlights of the 4 Cornered juggernaut he seemed incapable of working out which way to go. After almost 3 years and no doubt many revisions Marty still couldn't get the facts right. Some 24 hours after the release of the "final" report Marty dodged the glare and quietly changed the report. I now have two different versions but don't know which to believe since Marty hasn't heard of version control. Which version of the "final" report are we now up to Marty? Someone should just put him out of his misery.

I had hoped that the ATSB would be the investigative superhero, fighting the evil of vested and commercial interests to provide a fair and balanced report. Instead mild mannered Marty Dolan, like Clark Kent fails to quite get the girl. Marty is clearly no Superman.

On the 4 corners show Dominic James presented as professional, calm and cool under pressure; qualities that he also displayed during the accident. Dom was also believable, in direct contrast to CASA and the ATSB.

It must be quite frustrating to work within these organisations. The special audit of pel Air, as revealed by 4 corners was conducted by a host of no doubt conscientious professionals who must be embarrassed to find their efforts presented in this shameful way.

For a long time after the accident i had a recurring nightmare – I could never quite get out of the situation I was in. For the flying public the nightmare continues but the truth will get out.

apologies for the typos – windows shut down!!!!

A reporter since November 30, 1960, Ben Sandilands looks at what really matters up in the sky: public administration of air transport and its safety, the accountability of the carriers, and space for everyone's knees.

Follow this blog

Injured nurse Karen Casey in battle for closure

The Australian October 22, 2012 12:00AM

<http://www.theaustralian.com.au/business/aviation/injured-nurse-in-battle-for-closure/story-e6frg95x-1226500315127>

Steve Creedy

Aviation Editor

Sydney

<https://plus.google.com/107158623429005505864>

Karen Casey

Karen Casey, at home in Sydney, is seeking to reach a compensation deal with Pel-Air's insurers over a crash three years ago. Picture: Nikki Short Source: The Australian

THREE years after a nightmare ditching into the sea off Norfolk Island destroyed her life, former CareFlight nurse Karen Casey is battling nerve and neck damage that renders her unable to work and is using her superannuation to pay living expenses.

She is now seeking compensation discussions with the insurers of the company that operated the Westwind jet as an air ambulance, Pel-Air, and is hoping a Senate committee inquiry today into the 2009 crash will provide momentum to close a distressing chapter of her life.

The crash in 2009 has left her psychologically and physically damaged: she is taking 18 tablets a day and spending \$500 a month on medication, including one tablet for nerve damage not covered by the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme.

The aircraft crashed after it ran out of fuel near Norfolk Island while operating a medical evacuation for Ms Casey's employers, CareFlight, from Noumea in November 2009. Ms Casey, Captain Dominic James, co-pilot Zoe Cupit, doctor David Helm, patient Bernie Currall and husband Gary miraculously survived the night-time ditching in rough seas.

Ms Casey's memory of the crash is fractured. She remembers sitting in the brace position, the first of three impacts as the plane hit the water, struggling to release her seatbelt as the water rose around her and of being terrified of being torn to pieces by sharks.

She presumes she was rendered unconscious after the first impact with the water but remembers helping the doctor to unstrap the patient before turning to her own seatbelt. Her life vest malfunctioned, inflating on one side only and leaving her struggling to support Mrs Currall for 90 minutes before help arrived.

Today's committee will examine Australian Transport Safety Bureau findings that mistakes by the flight crew relating to fuel planning and weather checks contributed to the crash along with inadequate company guidelines on the issue.

It will compare these with a Civil Aviation Safety Authority special audit that uncovered a string of significant deficiencies in the company's operations. The airline was allowed to resume operations after it addressed the substantial list of CASA findings.

But while the committee pores over the technicalities, Ms Casey is left to face the human consequences of her ordeal and to seek closure with the company she holds responsible.

She is being treated for damage to the nerves connecting the spinal cord to her right arm, a neck injury and problems with her right leg; she has also had extensive dental work after cracking seven teeth.

She says the weekly payment the system provides is not enough to cover living expenses. "I'm paying \$610 a week rent and I get \$640 from workers' comp," she said. "So everything else -- shopping, bills -- is all coming out of my superannuation."

Ms Casey has told the Senate committee that she wants air safety strengthened and hers is one of several submissions calling for greater independence for the ATSB.

The crash plane was operating under an aerial work category which meant it faced less stringent requirements than a passenger carrying aircraft.

Where's the justice? Injured nurse Karen Casey in battle for closure

<http://www.injuredworkerssupport.org.au/wheres-the-justice-injured-nurse-karen-casey-in-battle-for-closure/>

News by Injured Worker Support

Yes, where is the justice? THREE years after a nightmare ditching into the sea off Norfolk Island destroyed her life, former CareFlight nurse Karen Casey is battling nerve and neck damage that renders her unable to work and is using her superannuation to pay living expenses. This scenario is all too common as many injured workers know. New laws rob injured workers of dignity not just their rights to fair compensation

Injured nurse Karen Casey in battle for closure

THREE years after a nightmare ditching into the sea off Norfolk Island destroyed her life, former CareFlight nurse Karen Casey is battling nerve and neck damage that renders her unable to work and is using her superannuation to pay living expenses.

She is now seeking compensation discussions with the insurers of the company that operated the Westwind jet as an air ambulance, Pel-Air, and is hoping a Senate committee inquiry today into the 2009 crash will provide momentum to close a distressing chapter of her life.

The crash in 2009 has left her psychologically and physically damaged: she is taking 18 tablets a day and spending \$500 a month on medication, including one tablet for nerve damage not covered by the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme.

The aircraft crashed after it ran out of fuel near Norfolk Island while operating a medical evacuation for Ms Casey's employers, CareFlight, from Noumea in November 2009. Ms Casey, Captain Dominic James, co-pilot Zoe Cupit, doctor David Helm, patient Bernie Currall and husband Gary miraculously survived the night-time ditching in rough seas.

Ms Casey's memory of the crash is fractured. She remembers sitting in the brace position, the first of three impacts as the plane hit the water, struggling to release her seatbelt as the water rose around her and of being terrified of being torn to pieces by sharks.

She presumes she was rendered unconscious after the first impact with the water but remembers helping the doctor to unstrap the patient before turning to her own seatbelt. Her life vest malfunctioned, inflating on one side only and leaving her struggling to support Mrs Currall for 90 minutes before help arrived.

Today's committee will examine Australian Transport Safety Bureau findings that mistakes by the flight crew relating to fuel planning and weather checks contributed to the crash along with inadequate company guidelines on the issue.

It will compare these with a Civil Aviation Safety Authority special audit that uncovered a string of significant deficiencies in the company's operations. The airline was allowed to resume operations after it addressed the substantial list of CASA findings.

But while the committee pores over the technicalities, Ms Casey is left to face the human consequences of her ordeal and to seek closure with the company she holds responsible.

She is being treated for damage to the nerves connecting the spinal cord to her right arm, a neck injury and problems with her right leg; she has also had extensive dental work after cracking seven teeth.

She says the weekly payment the system provides is not enough to cover living expenses. "I'm paying \$610 a week rent and I get \$640 from workers' comp," she said. "So everything else — shopping, bills — is all coming out of my superannuation."

Ms Casey has told the Senate committee that she wants air safety strengthened and hers is one of several submissions calling for greater independence for the ATSB.

The crash plane was operating under an aerial work category which meant it faced less stringent requirements than a passenger carrying aircraft.

Norfolk air crash survivors: OUR PILOT WAS NO HERO

Woman's Day (Australian Consolidated Press); 3/15/2010, Vol. 62 Issue 11, p32

The article discusses the survival experience of a couple Bernie Curral and Gary Curral during an air crash. The Melbourne, Victoria based, couple spend a night full of horror when the CareFlight plane immersed into the ocean. Bernie says that she has a recurring nightmare that she is outside the plane in the water and screaming for Gary. Gary does not agree when media praises the pilot despite the crash and now believes in miracles.

Doomed

Friday, March 5, 2010

<http://sixtyminutes.ninemsn.com.au/article.aspx?id=1020353>

Reporter: Michael Usher

Producer: Phil Goyen

An official report has confirmed 60 Minutes' exclusive findings into the Norfolk Island jet crash. Update this Sunday, 7.30pm

Imagine what it would be like in those last awful seconds before a plane crash.

Well strap yourself in, you're about to take that white-knuckle ride, sharing the final, terrifying moments of Pel-Air jet November Gulf Alpha.

Late last year, the jet plunged into the Pacific in the dead of night. But how could this plane literally run out of fuel? Well, we went searching for answers and what we discovered will horrify you.

Amazingly, all six people on board survived, on Sunday night you'll hear their incredible stories for the first time.

But this isn't just a remarkable tale of survival. The Pel-Air disaster raises serious questions about our air safety. For a start, how could this plane literally run out of fuel?

Well, we went searching for answers and what we discovered will horrify you.

Read the webchat transcript

Full transcript below:

MICHAEL USHER - STORY: It's a confronting image - the wreck of Pel-Air November Golf Alpha wedged in the sand on the floor of the Pacific, its final resting place after a night or terror in the skies over Norfolk Island. Six people were on board that night when the twin-engined jet slammed into the ocean on a flight from Samoa to Norfolk.

GARY CURRALL: I wondered how would I die. I wondered would the plane disintegrate, would it explode. You're questioning how it is you're going to go.

MICHAEL USHER: For the first time, Gary Currall and his wife, Bernie, describe the horror of those final moments.

BERNIE CURRALL: You were fighting for your life, you were fighting for your breath. It was horrendous. It was traumatic. It was horrific.

MICHAEL USHER: And three months on, the Curralls want answers. You see, the plane simply ran out of fuel and had to ditch at sea.

BERNIE CURRALL: We nearly died. I thought I'd lost my husband and I thought I was never going to see my kids again. It was just so wrong on so many levels and, yeah, I'm bloody angry about it.

MICHAEL USHER: This is an incredible story of survival, there's no doubt about it. How anyone escaped alive is nothing short of a miracle. But why did that jet crash off the rugged coastline here at Norfolk Island, way out there about 6km out to sea? Well, as you'll see tonight, critical decisions were made before the accident which raise serious questions for the pilot, Dominic James, the airline, Pel-Air and Australia's aviation regulators, questions they're in no hurry to answer. Gary and Bernie Currall love adventure. Victoria's home but they've travelled the world. 12 months ago, they got a dream opportunity to work in Samoa but in November last year Bernie fell ill after a botched hysterectomy. A CareFlight medical team was dispatched to get her back to Melbourne for specialist care.

BERNIE CURRALL: I was just relieved. I thought, "OK, I'll go home and, you know, we'll get fixed. They'll fix it."

MICHAEL USHER: So it was good news when you learnt that jet was on its way!

GARY CURRALL: It was. We were looking forward to getting some proper treatment for Bernie.

MICHAEL USHER: This is the type of plane that came to Bernie's rescue - a twin-engine Westwind jet, operated by Pel-Air. They left Samoa at dusk, with a plan to refuel on Norfolk Island before continuing to Melbourne. On board, CareFlight doctor David Helm and nurse Karen Casey were caring for Bernie, who was strapped into a stretcher for the flight.

KAREN CASEY: I just recall looking at her, thinking, "Thank God she's here, she's going to be OK."

MICHAEL USHER: The copilot was Zoe Culpit. And in command of everyone's wellbeing was Dominic James, a pilot with 10 years experience. The dashing captain is also something of a celebrity - a former 'Cleo' Bachelor of the Year contestant. But it's Dominic James's actions that night that are now being scrutinised by two major investigations. The first sign of trouble came as the jet approached Norfolk Island for its refuelling stop. Larry Quintel was manning the airport control room.

LARRY QUINTEL: The weather was one of the worst I've think I've seen here for a long time. It was clagged into where it was unseeable. The pilots would have no vis of Norfolk Island at all.

AIR TRAFFIC CONTROL: I will switch all runways on to high intensity and if you wish I could put the strobes on the ends of the runways as well. PILOT: Yeah, if you could put everything on, that'd be appreciated. Thank you.

MICHAEL USHER: This is the actual recording between the jet and Norfolk air traffic control. At this stage, Dominic James is calm but landing at Norfolk Island is looking extremely doubtful and he's fast running out of fuel.

AIR TRAFFIC CONTROL: The visibility has dropped down to about 4,000 as we speak, but I think it's all because of this rainstorm we've got going through here now.

PILOT: Okey dokes. Well, keep me posted of any development, thanks, and I'll speak to you shortly.

MICHAEL USHER: It's soon clear to everyone on the ground the jet won't be landing at Norfolk. Normally if a pilot can't land because of bad weather he would divert to a stand-by destination known as an alternate. Incredibly, Dominic has no fallback.

AIR TRAFFIC CONTROL: Have you got an alternate for this?

PILOT: Ah, negative. We don't.

MICHAEL USHER: Dominic reaches Norfolk and circles the island, attempting to land three times but he can't even see the runway. Then, the unthinkable.

PILOT: Ah, Norfolk, we're going to have to ditch - we've got no fuel.

AIR TRAFFIC CONTROL: November Golf Alpha, are you serious? Can you get enough fuel to make Noumea?

CO-PILOT: Negative.

MICHAEL USHER: The fate of all on board is sealed. At this stage, Dominic James has committed to Norfolk and there's not enough fuel to get them to another airport.

LARRY QUINTEL: There was no indication or lead-up to that to say he did not have the fuel to go anywhere else. All of a sudden, when I found he had no alternate I knew there was a big problem coming. We were in trouble. HE was in trouble.

GARY CURRALL: After what I took to be the fourth approach, the doors to the cockpit opened and the copilot looked back at us with a look of horror on her face. She said we were going to ditch.

MICHAEL USHER: Could you believe what you were hearing, that the crew was telling you you were going to crash?

GARY CURRALL: No, not all. It was just total disbelief.

KAREN CASEY: I didn't have a fear of dying but I thought, you know, I won't be able to hug my boy. I won't be able to watch my girls put their make-up on and things - silly little things - like that.

BERNIE CURRALL: They're all going, "We're going to ditch, going to ditch." And then you've got these lights coming on in the plane as were going down. The lights come on - these yellow lights - and it goes, "Terrain, terrain, pull up, pull up." And that was terrifying.

MICHAEL USHER: Back at Norfolk airport Larry Quintel hears a short radio crackle then nothing.

AIR TRAFFIC CONTROL: Victor Hotel, November Golf Alpha, Norfolk Unicom, do you copy?

KAREN CASEY: I thought we'd actually hit concrete. Instantly water came in from behind me so I knew it was the ocean.

GARY CURRALL: A deluge of water simply hit me in the chest. That's when you know "I'm going to die, I'm going to drown." The pilot flashed past me and that gave me the goal then - I knew I had to follow the pilot. Where he was going I needed to go.

MICHAEL USHER: It was nearly 10:00 at night, it was pitch black, the water was freezing and there was a 2m swell. It was chaos.

BERNIE CURRALL: I was strapped into the stretcher and I was just lying there, immobilised. I couldn't move... and all the water just, I was just, all the water was coming over my face and then I thought maybe I'm going to drown.

MICHAEL USHER: Amid it all, Nurse Karen Casey and Dr David Helm made Bernie their priority, unstrapping her from the stretcher and helping her from the sinking plane - the real heroes of this disaster.

KAREN CASEY: I looked at Bernie and Bernie looked at me and no words were needed. I just thought, you know, I'm not going to let you go, there is no way.

BERNIE CURRALL: I just knew that if I didn't keep going I was going to die, and I wasn't going to die - dying just wasn't an option.

MICHAEL USHER: Once out of the plane, Karen stayed with Bernie keeping her afloat. Husband Gary was the last to emerge. Amazingly everyone had survived the impact but now they were at the mercy of the sea. And worse - no-one knew where to look for them because their pilot had not issued a mayday.

KAREN CASEY: You know, we were in the middle of a survival story. We weren't at the beginning or the end - we were in the middle in the ocean.

MICHAEL USHER: And you're doing this at night? In worse conditions?

DARREN BATES: Yep. Back at Norfolk, the rescue team, including Darren Bates and Aaron Graham, swung into action, desperately combing the ocean.

MICHAEL USHER: At that stage, did you know where to go?

DARREN BATES: No, we were told to head south-east which is out towards the island out there.

MICHAEL USHER: Other than that, nothing?

DARREN BATES: Nothing, no. Just go out there and look.

MICHAEL USHER: A needle in a haystack?

DARREN BATES: Very much so, yeah.

MICHAEL USHER: It came down to sheer luck. A local resident standing on a cliff spotted a flicker of light the opposite direction to where most thought the plane had gone down. A fishing radar then did the rest.

AARON GRAHAM: We could hear one lady's voice there yelling, just yelling. I couldn't make out what was going on but I could hear someone yelling and that's when I hear the pilot yell out, "There's six of us alive."

KAREN CASEY: When we saw the green light coming from the right of the boat, it was the most amazing feeling that I think I'll ever have. I knew I was going home to my kids.

BERNIE CURRALL: It was just wonderful. I mean, it was just "We ARE going to live."

MICHAEL USHER: The jet sank within minutes - a million-dollar aircraft broken in three. Those who survived want to know how it happened. Out here you're a long way from anywhere. That's why, under civil aviation safety rules, all pilots who are headed to the island have to carry enough fuel to divert if they get into trouble. It's simply reckless and dangerous not to have a Plan B in this part of the Pacific. So why on earth did pilot Dominic James take off without a full load of fuel? This is a copy of the fuel receipt signed and authorised by Captain James. He's told investigators he didn't fill the tanks to capacity or nominate an alternate because he believed he had clear weather to Norfolk Island. In the days after the crash, Pel-Air backed its pilot, saying in this case the normal safety rules didn't apply - medevac flights were exempt. The question is why that exemption was ever approved by the Civil Aviation Safety Authority.

MICHAEL USHER: Would you have taken off in that plane from that island without a full tank of fuel?

MAURIE BASTON: No, I wouldn't.

MICHAEL USHER: Maurie Baston was the chief pilot at Air Nauru in the Pacific and a former chief at the Civil Aviation Safety Authority.

MICHAEL USHER: Would that seem extraordinary to you that this airline would have an exemption not to carry enough fuel flying in that part of the Pacific, and not have an alternate?

MAURIE BASTON: It would foolhardy, in my view. If I was the manager of the airline I would not allow that to go on. I would not accept that policy. There has to be a bottom line where safety is not compromised. The rules are clear. I cannot see any justification for varying those rules.

MICHAEL USHER: Immediately after the crash, company officials gathered here, at Pel-Air's Sydney headquarters, for a crisis meeting. At that stage information from Norfolk island was limited but they were certain of one thing - this was a potential public relations nightmare. But long before Pel-Air knew the full facts of the crash, its executives got to work on their spin strategy and the star of that spin would be their pin-up boy pilot. They'd hail Dominic James a hero, and hopefully deflect questions about his actions or their own. They knew it was a story the media would swallow.

JOHN SHARP (15 NOVEMBER 2009): If the pilots weren't as skilled and professional as they were on the day, this could have been a totally different outcome.

MICHAEL USHER: As the six crash survivors finally made it back to Australia, airline deputy chairman John Sharp happily peddled the hero-pilot story.

JOHN SHARP (ARCHIVAL): This is the equivalent to a gold medal for aviation. Yes, he was a 'Cleo' Bachelor of the Year.

RADIO HOST: It's all part of the Pel-Air experience! JOHN SHARP: Yes, we only employ the very best people at Pel-Air.

MICHAEL USHER: But behind the scenes, it was no laughing matter. Pel-Air swiftly changed its fuel policy, ordering all crews to carry enough fuel for a Plan B landing. It was a sensitive time for Pel-Air, which was close to securing a \$70 million contract for Air Ambulance Victoria. John Sharp declined to be interviewed for this story and again refused to answer questions outside the airline's offices.

MICHAEL USHER: Six people almost died, why wasn't there enough fuel on board that plane for it to land somewhere safely?

JOHN SHARP: Michael, I've already told you over the telephone. You didn't need to come and ask me these questions in front of the camera. You've already discussed this over the telephone and I've given you the reasons why we're not able to speak...

MICHAEL USHER: But are you hiding behind the investigation?

MICHAEL USHER: Pilot Dominic James also refused interview requests, claiming he's been gagged by investigators and Pel-Air.

MICHAEL USHER: Have you had any contact from Pel-Air since the crash?

BERNIE CURRALL: None whatsoever.

GARY CURRALL: Not a call, no flowers, no 'get well' card, nothing.

MICHAEL USHER: That must make you furious?

BERNIE CURRALL: Absolutely furious.

GARY CURRALL: The impression we get is they don't care.

MICHAEL USHER: Bernie and Gary haven't travelled since the crash. They're treasuring the moments with their grandchildren. Like all the survivors, they know how lucky they are to be here. Gary and Bernie, I've got someone here I'd like you to see.

BERNIE CURRALL: Oh my God! Oh, my God! Oh, bloody hell. Oh, hon. Oh, Karen, I can't believe it.

MICHAEL USHER: Seeing each other for the first time since that night, it's clear Bernie and the nurse who saved her life, Karen Casey, have a bond that will last a lifetime.

KAREN CASEY: I would never have let you go, you know. I remember the moment when we were told that we were going to ditch, and I looked up at Gary. Gary, you looked behind, because Bernie was lying on the stretcher and you looked up at him over your shoulder and held hands. And I just thought it was just a moment of pure, pure love and I thought, "There is no way these two can be separated," and, you know, we're going to get out of here and it's going to be all good.

MICHAEL USHER: The investigation into the crash should be completed mid-year. In the meantime, Dominic James's pilot's licence has been suspended, pending the findings of the investigation.

Chat: Bernie and Gary Currall - our live online chat room.

Monday, March 8, 2010

Interviewer: 60 Minutes presents a live interview with Bernie & Gary Currall, here to talk to us about their plane crash survival.

Interviewer: Bernie and Gary thank you for talking to us tonight, in our live online chat room. Thank you for having us here tonight, looking forward to answering your questions

Interviewer: Now we will go to the questions from our guests.

sucima asks: Sorry I am a bit confused can you give us some background about the flight, where from where too and Bernie if not too personal, what was happening for you?

Bernie: We were flying from Apia enroute to Melbourne, to the Royal Women's Hospital. I had had an hysterectomy that had not been successful and I needed to get to Melbourne for further medical assistance.

Renee asks: Hi Bernie and Gary. After your plane landed in the water, were you left with anything to cling to or were you forced to tread water? Were you concerned about the prospect of sharks?

Bernie: When the plane crashed it was like an explosion and part of the plane broke up. I was strapped in and the water went over my face. My concern was Gary as he was the last off the plane. I didn't think about sharks, only my next breath and where Gary was.

Gary: I have to say the plane crashed and the re-enactment shows that it made a gentle landing. It was nothing like that. I was aware of sharks and we were all cut and bleeding so it was a concern. We tried to cling onto the plane. The plane was partly submerged at that point and was beginning to sink. We were getting buffeted against the plane and we decided to try and swim away from it. At some point after that the plane sank. Even as we clung onto the wreckage it was jagged metal and was cutting into us too.

minfuel asks: Did you receive any briefing and instructions from the crew prior to the aircraft ditching? Furthermore did you receive a proper safety briefing from the crew prior to departure?

Gary: We received a very brief explanation how to operate the emergency exit from the Doctor before we departed. The co-pilot told us we would ditch and the doctor handed out life jackets and placed two life rafts in the aisle of the aircraft. That's about the only instruction we got.

Hank asks: When did you know something was wrong on the plane flight?

Gary: It was apparent from the movement of the aircraft and the noises and the lights we were making missed approaches. I could see some lights below us but we were being buffeted by the weather and the plane was going up and down on the approach. it was like a roller coaster ride. It was then we realised things weren't going to plan.

arfur asks: Did the captain assisted you getting off the plane as it seems a little odd that he appeared to jump "ship"as you mentioned that he ran past you ?

Gary: The pilot was the first to exit the plane. As far as I'm aware he didn't assist anybody.

sean asks: How did you get out of the plane once it had hit the water?

Gary: I was trapped in my seat by the force of the water coming from the forward hatch and had to unbuckle my seat and struggle against the water. As I went to follow the Pilot I was hit by a wave that propelled me into the ceiling. I tried to take 3 or 4 breaths but each one was water, and I then by feeling found the emergency exit hatch and was able to pull myself down through the water and up a metre or two to the surface. With Bernie the doctor opened the exit on the side, unbuckled her straps and pushed her through the exit.

KeithCooma asks: Gary, Bernie. are you happy that Dominic was able to safely ditch the plane?

Gary: That's a leading question. The plane hit the water at 200kph and broke up and sank. Again, the pilot did everything he could have to ensure the landing was made as good as possible. But I think the evidence shows the force of the impact tore the aircraft apart.

katee.j.. asks: We missed your interview on television were there other passengers on the plane??

Gary: No, two pilots, a nurse, myself, Bernie and the doctor that's all.

luckyone asks: I was involved a small plane crash in Nowra '94 all survived but many many broken bits was there any broken bones or scrapes?

Gary: Nobody suffered any broken bones but all of us had various injuries. I have extensive cuts and bruising around my midriff and the middle of my calf and a whole serious of bruises which I think came from being caught inside the cabin, when it was full of water. It was like a tumble dryer. One had had 25 cuts from clinging to the wreckage and the torn metal of the fuselage.

guest asks: Hi, I'm sorry for your tragic experience and glad to know that you're both well. My question is, How soon after you were rescued did you receive medical treatment?

Gary: We were picked up by the fishing boats, taken to land some 4km away. It was quite a bumpy ride. there was an ambulance at the jetty. Because the sea was so rough the boat had to be winched up on a crane at the jetty. we got to hospital probably within about 30 minutes or so of being picked up.

69lemonchick asks: Were life rafts available and if so why weren't they used?

Gary: There were 3 lifejackets between 6 of us and 2 life rafts in the aisle placed there by the doctor, however there was no time to take them with us. The plane flew into the water immediately and it was simply a case of get out quickly.

Bartholomew asks: Hi Gary what was the force of the water like on your bodies?

Gary: The force was strong enough to break up the aircraft, so it was quite severe. I was in a brace position and I think that helped. we had two very severe impacts with the water and the thought that came to mind was we had actually survived them. When the plane started to fill the forces were significant also, but we survived somehow with no broken bones.

amanda asks: Bernie did you receive medical assistance in Norfolk? or how did you get home?

Bernie: Yes I did get some medical assistance in the hospital on Norfolk Island. They did offer to send another small aircraft to pick us up but we declined and waited for the next commercial flight the following day. That was a larger plane.

tamara14 asks: Was there a moment when either of you lost sight of each other? or were you in contact the whole time?

Gary: Bernie was out of the aircraft for some time before I was. It was a worrying period for her as everyone else was out and she was aware of that, so it was pretty frightening. I remember her screaming my name as they tried to find me. From then on, Bernie was supported by a nurse on one side and me on the other as she had no lifejacket.

Peter asks: Can you tell me about the guys in the boat that found you.

Gary: I have a couple of memories one a man called Shannon. When Bernie was pulled from the water she only had a pair of briefs on, and Shannon used his body heat by hugging her to keep her warm.

Another memory is a young lady who was a volunteer and she gave us blankets and tried to comfort us and I remember her putting her hand on my shoulder and the warmth was incredible. We were hypothermic by then and that warmth from her hand was amazing and comforting.

racinjason asks: When you actually hit the water and it was all dark and loud..what was your first thought..."Is this real?" or immediate survival instincts

Gary: Each thought and each action was towards our survival so there was no time to think and reflect on what had happened .. you just followed the chain of events and worked out what you needed to do to survive. My very first thought was that I survived the impact and I was silently cheering. At one point I recall thinking I was lucky as I had plenty of legroom so I could adopt a good brace position as I'm quite tall. If I had to ditch in an aircraft in economy class I'm sure I would have broken both my legs. Immediately after hitting the water it was really just survival mode.

amanda asks: How long were you in the water??

Gary: We were in the water for 90 minutes. In some respects it seemed shorter. We were trying to swim towards the lights on the island and I had lost my glasses. We were trying also to support those without lifejackets. We thought we heard noises of someone coming to rescue us but they were false alarms. We huddled together and were all very cold and I think hypothermia was starting to set in so I'm not sure how much longer we could have gone on. The rescue boat came in a big arc and came in from behind us. We found out later the boats had been sent in the wrong direction. They assumed we had crashed in one direction south of the island in fact we were off to the west. So when we saw the boat it seemed to be coming from behind us, and was in fact heading back towards the island.

Graham asks: Did the stretcher adequately restrain you during the landing Bernie?

Bernie: Yes it did. I didn't suffer any physical injury that you might expect in that situation.

Prرت asks: Hi Bernie, Hi Gary, "off track a little", but do your everyday lives feel like they are worth much more than before the incident, I would think that it has changed your outlook in a big way?

Gary: Yes it has. We assessed our goals and decided we would rather spend more time with our family as we have 5 grand daughters. Two of them we've not seen yet and have been born why we were away. We've now settled back to be near them.

InspiredViwr asks: Even now, how do you feel about getting on an airplane ? Are the memories still there to haunt you? Do you feel confident boarding an airplane?

Gary: I would be surprised if Bernie will fly in the short term. I don't think she'd be confident at all. I think I would be ok, I've no problem with the flight back from Norfolk, but Bernie was heavily sedated. Australia is a big place and some time we will have to see friends in other parts of the country so flying may be necessary. But for now we won't be flying for a while.

Robyn asks: How has surviving the plane crash changed your life?

Gary: We both have psychological issues from the crash and our brush with death. Bernie is still very nervous as a passenger in a car and has only driven twice since our return to Melbourne. We have chosen to spend more time with our family and are taking the view that life is short and we need to enjoy it as we simply don't know what's around the corner.

giantbird asks: I cannot imagine how you must feel almost being killed. What justice are you looking for.

Gary: That is something we are taking advice upon and I can't really comment at this stage. I hope you will understand.

Interviewer: I am sorry we are out of time, do you have anything else you would like to share before we finish tonight

Gary: I'd like to thank everyone for their interest. I'd also like to thank the people who helped save us who simply don't know that the goodness of strangers is so wonderful when the need arises. We had what appears to have been bad luck but we also had good luck and without all that help and support we wouldn't be here today. Again thank you all for your interest and kind words.

Interviewer: Once again thank you, and goodnight.

Interviewer: This concludes our chat with Bernie & Gary Currall, Sunday March 7, 2010.

Glamour pilot no hero: passengers

<http://www.smh.com.au/national/glamour-pilot-no-hero-passengers-20100308-ps6d.html>

Date: March 8, 2010

Georgina Robinson

Two passengers on board a light plane forced to ditch into the ocean off Norfolk Island last year say their pin-up boy pilot does not deserve the hero status he received in the wake of the accident.

Bernie and Gary Currall were on board a CareFlight service operated by Pel-Air from Samoa when it ran out of fuel in bad weather as it approached Norfolk Island, about 10pm on November 18. Nearly four months later they told their story to 60 Minutes on the Nine Network and Woman's Day magazine.

Pilot Dominic James, a former Cleo Bachelor of the Year contestant, tried to land the plane four times before deciding to ditch in the ocean because the "aircraft's fuel supply was exhausted", an Australian Transport Safety Bureau (ATSB) preliminary report found.

All six passengers and crew on board survived and were rescued after spending 90 minutes stranded in rough seas about six kilometres off Norfolk Island.

Captain James was hailed a hero in the media, an Australian version of Chesley B Sullenberger, the pilot responsible for ditching on New York's Hudson River.

But Mr James's licence has been suspended while the Australian aviation watchdog investigates.

Bernie Currall, the patient on board, who was being evacuated from Samoa after a botched hysterectomy, says she's furious the crash occurred at all.

"[The pilot] didn't have enough fuel," Mrs Currall told Woman's Day.

"There was no plan B."

"We were subjected to the most terrifying experience, and it could have been avoided."

The ATSB found in its preliminary report the crew decided to only fill the plane's main fuel tanks, giving it enough fuel to make it to Norfolk Island, where the pilot planned to refuel for the second leg to Melbourne.

"At that time the forecast weather conditions at Norfolk Island for the arrival did not require the carriage of additional fuel for holding, or the nomination of an alternate airport," the report stated.

But conditions deteriorated fast.

By the time the plane was ready to land, "it was dark and raining with low cloud and poor visibility", the investigation found.

Mrs Currall said the plane was shaking violently in the wild weather when she heard the word "ditching".

"We were falling at almost 200 kilometres an hour," she said.

"I was terrified. Life jackets were handed around, but I didn't get one.

"Then a yellow light came on and a horrible electronic voice kept saying over and over, 'terrain, terrain, pull up, pull up.'"

Mrs Currall said it felt like the plane was hitting concrete when it first touched the water.

"Pel-Air later said it was a 'controlled, perfect landing'," she said.

"No, it was a bloody plane crash."

A Pel-Air spokeswoman said the company had not comment to make since the incident was still under investigation.

Mr James was still employed with the company, she said.

Mrs Currall said she remembered being strapped to the stretcher under water as the plane sank.

"I couldn't move or get up," she said.

"Water is all over me, that horrible light is still flashing and that recorded voice is still yelling."

Mrs Currall was pulled out of the sinking plane by the doctor and nurse on board.

The Civil Aviation and Safety Authority has launched a separate investigation into several aspects of the flight, including flight planning, fuel planning and management, and decision making, a spokesman said.

Mr and Mrs Currall said the true heroes in their rescue were the Norfolk Islanders who took a boat out that night to rescue the passengers and crew.

"It was a dirty, horrible night and they risked their lives," Mrs Currall said.