

Catastrophic Failures in Risk Management, 4: The Terrorist Attack on Air-India Flight 182

30 June 2011

The month of June 2011 marks the first anniversary of the release of *Air India Flight 182: A Canadian Tragedy*, the final report of the Commission of Inquiry into the Investigation of the Bombing of Air India Flight 182, headed by Mr. Justice John Major.

The mid-flight destruction of Flight 182 off the Irish coast on 23 June 1985 killed all 329 passengers and crew; an explosion at Narita Airport in Japan, which was part of the same terrorist plot, killed two baggage handlers there. The resulting toll represents, still today, the second-largest loss of life (second only to the September 11, 2001 events in the United States) in a single terrorist plot ever to occur anywhere in the world.

The work of the Commission of Inquiry took place over a period of four years and included an exhaustive review of documentary evidence, lengthy hearings at which witnesses were heard and examined, and the compilation of a large collection of research papers containing expert analysis. Relatives and friends of the murdered victims had waited more than a quarter-century for a full accounting of what was, in the Commission's considered view, a preventable tragedy.

The Wikipedia entry, "Air India Flight 182," provides a useful overview of the events and the reactions to them over the entire period. The entire five-volume Final Report of the Commission of Inquiry is available on a CD-ROM at a cost of \$29.95:
<http://publications.gc.ca/site/eng/370979/publication.html>.

Following are two excerpts from Chapter V of Volume 1 (The Overview).

Page 166:

"The bombing of Air India Flight 182 was preventable but was made possible because of an unintentionally coordinated series of aviation security failures on the part of a number of stakeholders:

- CP Air failed to follow its own baggage security procedures;
- Both Air India and Transport Canada failed to appreciate the threat posed by unaccompanied, interlined bags;
- Air India was inexcusably careless in deploying checked baggage screening devices and procedures which it ought to have known were inadequate for the purpose, and failed to prevent unauthorized bags from being placed on its flights;
- Transport Canada, on behalf of the Government of Canada, failed in its role as regulator by neglecting to adapt the existing aviation security regime to confront the known terrorist threat of sabotage;
- Transport Canada also failed in its regulatory role by denying Air

India the security support it required and by permitting Air India to rely on security procedures and plans that were inadequate to respond to the known threat of sabotage;

- Due to a climate of excessive secrecy nurtured by uncritical adherence to the “need-to-know” principle, crucially important intelligence was not shared, nor was it collected and analyzed in a coordinated manner; and
- Each of Air India, Transport Canada and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) failed to appropriately assess threat and intelligence information and to adequately communicate such information to relevant stakeholders.”

Page 168:

“In fact, security measures that could have prevented the suitcase containing the bomb from being placed on the flight were available, but were simply not implemented.”

Disclosure:

I assisted the Commission of Inquiry as an expert on risk management and risk communication.