

Take the Pressure Down

Pilots experience pressures from all angles but how many bad decisions stem from commercial burdens? And what can you do to make sure financial concerns don't compromise safety?

CAA Safety Investigator Matt Harris says it's difficult to quantify how much of a role commercial pressures play in accidents and incidents but it does exist.

"We've always had a gut feeling but there hasn't been hard evidence to say this or that accident was caused because of commercial tension. It's one of those contributing factors underlying an event."

The CAA is investigating the light helicopter industry, and Matt says one of the themes coming through is that commercial pressures do have an influence.

Jeanette Lusty, the CAA's Acting Manager, Special Flight Operations and Recreational Aviation, suspects it happens less than it did in the past.

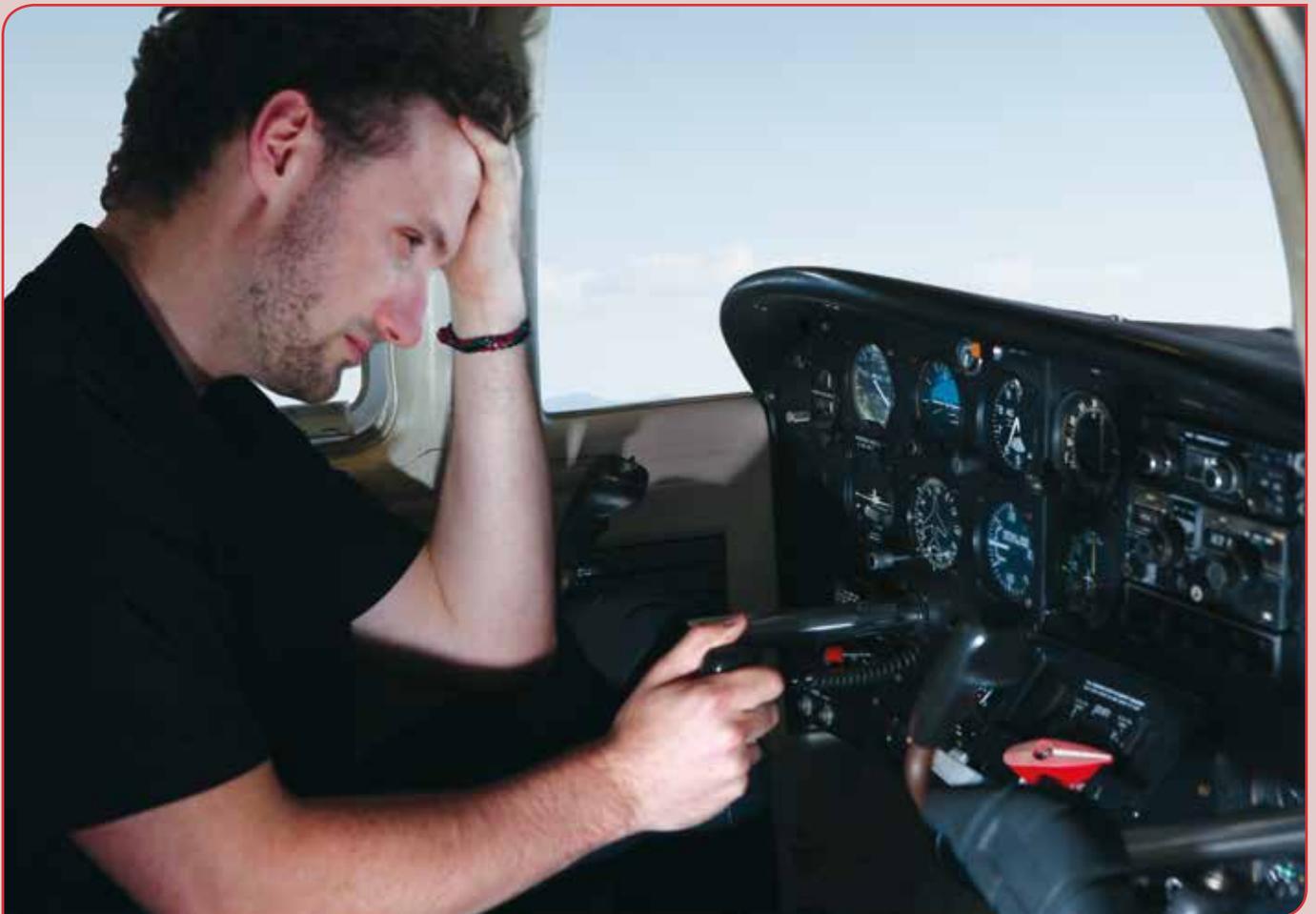
"Some employers will pressure their pilots to do the job because of the income. Pilots that don't stand up for the right to make their own decisions in the cockpit are headed for trouble. And employers that take the decisions away from the pilot are also creating a massive safety issue."

Stop Pressuring Yourself

However, it's not necessarily the employer putting the squeeze on.

A lot of it is perceived pressure or self-induced pressure, says Marty Gambrell, the CAA's Flight Operations Inspector for Helicopters.

"Some pilots think the boss wants them to carry out the operation, get the job done. But in actual fact the boss would



often be more than happy for them to pull the pin and come home if the weather's bad."

Marty says some pilots worry that turning down jobs might stifle their progress. "You sometimes get a lot of competitiveness within a company, pilots trying to build hours, trying to outdo each other."

Mark Woodhouse from Waypoints Aviation has been a flight examiner for many years and produces flight training manuals.

"The message I hear is by far the most pressure is self-induced and perceived rather than actual pressure by the operator."

Do pilots need to temper their egos from time to time?

"I don't think that message, especially for young males, is a bad one but they're pretty much the exception. People like that get identified reasonably early and it's a very small industry in this country," says Mark.

Saying No Is Okay

CAA Safety Investigator, Dan Foley, says having the confidence to say no is important.

"Pilots in their first commercial job would probably be more susceptible to pressures than those who've been around a while and have enough experience to stand up and say 'no, I'm not happy with what's taking place'."

"It can be cut-throat in your first commercial job, where you're trying to build hours and get yourself established – it's tricky."

But the CEO of Ardmore Flying School in Auckland, Mike Newman, believes the next generation of pilots is more savvy.

"We certainly find it with young people we talk to, they are quite happy to stand up and speak their mind when they are uncomfortable with something".

He thinks the whole industry has probably evolved a lot.

"As we say, crashing planes is bad business. I think the whole idea of commercial pressure is less of an issue in the industry nowadays. The industry people I speak to firmly promote the safety first attitude."

Risk Areas

Commercial pressure and competition are identified in the CAA's Part 135 sector risk profile.

Dan Foley says the boom in tourist numbers has created the potential for competition between small operators.

"Financial pressure could lead to undercutting between different operators. To combat this, I would like to see operators working collectively, setting standards, and making sure operators adhere to them."

But Dan believes the aviation system in New Zealand is becoming more mature.

John Sinclair, the Executive Officer of the Helicopter Association and the Agricultural Aviation Association agrees.

"There's no question the industry is more professional."

John says sometimes it's the end user who applies the pressure.

"Farmers put a lot of pressure on pilots because they want product on, but the pilots can get hamstrung by the weather. It can go on sometimes for days and days so there might be a dozen farmers on the list."

He says the pressure is insidious.

"That sometimes puts financial pressure on the business owner and that in turn can put pressure on pilots. So the owner has to think carefully about the effect that disclosing financial information will have on the pilot."

John says pilots can feel pressure from impatient passengers.

"The heli-ski season is a busy season, highly competitive and that in itself brings pressures."

CAA Safety Investigator Colin Grounell recalls a fatal accident in Taranaki in 2008, involving a topdressing pilot.

One of the conclusions of the accident report found the aircraft was probably overloaded for the prevailing environmental conditions.

"It was coming up to Christmas, and the pilot was due to go on leave the next day for the start of an extended holiday. He was keen to finish the task at this particular farm so he could go away with a clean slate."

"Additional pressure came from a poor weather forecast for the next day."

Colin says back then it was quite common in the topdressing industry for pilots to not get paid until the job was completed but that situation has improved since then.

How Do You Respond?

John Sinclair says the way a pilot responds to pressure will dictate the outcome.

"Some people are conditioned and can put that pressure to one side, others will get wound up to the extent that their decision-making is compromised."

Mark Woodhouse says he has a few mantras he tries to live by for safe flying.

"The later I am, the slower I go."

"Because if you ever want to make yourself famous it will be by rushing."

Jeannette Lusty, who's had management roles in the helicopter industry, used to be very clear with her staff.

"If my guys called me and said 'I'm not liking the look of this' I would say 'you should have already turned around and got out of there'."

"Even if you have to stay the night somewhere, it's still a much better option." ■