

Aftermath

In February 2014, Bruce Peterson's Aerospread company was plunged into crisis after one of its aircraft crashed, critically injuring the loader driver, and seriously injuring the pilot – who turned out to be flying illegally.



Photo courtesy of Aerospread

Just minutes after it took off on a 600-tonne topdressing sortie from the pilot's Hawke's Bay airstrip, Lima Tango Echo – a Cresco – slammed into the ground.

The pilot had been asked to return to his own airstrip because of high winds at the client's property. But he'd failed to maintain airspeed and height, and the aircraft had collided with a deer fence, propelling the nose into the ground. Both the pilot and loader driver received severe injuries on impact.

The pilot's family heard the crash and alerted emergency services.

It took 90 minutes to free the pilot and loader driver from the wreckage. They were flown to hospital for the first of several operations.

"Our world turned upside down in a flight of just three minutes and 53 seconds," says Bruce Peterson, managing director of the family-owned top dressing company, Aerospread.

"There's quite a bit to do, when you get a phone call with news like that," he says, understatedly.

By 6:30 am, about 20 minutes after that phone call, Bruce had stood down all staff from flying duties, notified the CAA, and contacted his insurer.

He phoned NZAAA executive officer, John Sinclair. "I got great advice from John," says Bruce. "He was calm and solid during a time of real confusion. It was the first of many conversations I had with him over the next few days."

While the 'nuts and bolts' were being taken care of, Bruce was also dealing with the panic and anxiety of the pilot's and driver's families. The driver, Billy, was particularly badly injured and was in the operating theatre for more than 12 hours.

The first reporter rang. It opened the door to relentless media hounding, particularly of Bruce, as spokesperson of the company and employer of the injured men.

"Fortunately, we had some media guidelines for lots of different scenarios. They included pre-written press releases where we just filled in some blanks. It was great to have those ready to go, because I had so many other things to think about."

And all the while, one half of his flying fleet was lying broken in some anonymous paddock, now 'evidence' in the upcoming CAA investigation.

"LTE was my pride and joy," says Bruce. "I'd done 10,500 hours in that aeroplane. We couldn't move it until the CAA had been down and done their thing. So it just had to stay there."

In the meantime, Bruce and his wife Helen were often at the hospital with the families of the pilot and driver.

"A couple of days in and the pilot was in a stable condition, but Billy got an infection and was in a critical condition. He was put on life support."

Bruce remembers with some bitterness, how, along with the support and help he was receiving from many people, some others could not have cared less.

"Quite sobering, really."

He found dealing with the CAA "not a horrible experience".

"I had absolutely no problem opening up the whole company to the CAA. There might have been some unsigned document somewhere, but we knew we were 99.9 per cent spot on."

Continued over >>

» Continued from previous page

"I think that sent a clear signal to CAA that we had nothing to hide, and that kept the relationship between us pretty positive."

Aerospread managed to get a Cresco on loan, and with its other aircraft flying, it was back in business.

Then another setback. The company's second pilot began to struggle mentally with the accident and needed time away to "get his head around things".

So Bruce took on the pilot's flying duties, but continued to pay him over the next three weeks.

"Things undoubtedly started to load up on me a bit," he says, again with understatement.

Four weeks after the accident and the pilot was recovering well, although Billy was still battling away in intensive care.

The time for formal interviews with the CAA arrived. As did a bombshell.

"The pilot wasn't allowed to carry passengers. He'd had a heart attack and had a restriction on his medical.

"When Billy's family was told about this, all their grief and anger shot out at me, as the operator and Billy's employer. But the CAA team was awesome and took the family aside and explained how the situation had come about."

So how *had* the situation developed?

"Well, I'd cocked up, because I didn't know," says Bruce. "I didn't know about the restriction on the medical. We had the right documentation and I'd sighted it all: ag competency checks signed off by other E-cats, log books, current pilot licence, and medical.

"But the thing I didn't do was sight the *original* medical certificate. The pilot had sent me photocopies and I hadn't seen the reverse which detailed the limitation on carrying passengers.

"I had even asked him about his health and he'd said only that he was on cholesterol pills."

Bruce says his biggest mistake was trusting the man.

"I'd known him for 15 years. I'd flown with him in a previous company, and it never, ever entered my mind that he would lie.

"So when your employer asks to see the original copy of your medical and your licence, don't be offended, they really need to know. And if you're employing someone, ask to see original documentation."

But such reflections were for the future. Bruce had here-and-now worries. The second pilot resigned 'effective immediately'



Photo courtesy of Aerospread

to take up work elsewhere. The pilot involved in the accident left hospital and was formally charged. Again that focused media attention on the company, and on Bruce.

Billy came out of ICU, but remained in hospital for another four operations.

It would be another 67 days before he too would leave hospital. And when he did he was released only to a retirement home because he needed somewhere that could cater to his still high needs.

"It wasn't pleasant for him," says Bruce. "He couldn't walk, he had plates in his back. He was in bed 20 hours a day."

The memory of it still triggers emotion in Bruce. "All Billy had done (to deserve this) was turn up for work."

So while Bruce was dealing with revelations about his pilot, an impending court case, and the emotion surrounding Billy's slow and painful recovery, he was also cobbling together an operation to satisfy customers. While at first very sympathetic, they now just needed the 'fert' on their land.

And he was up for some serious bills.

"Of course, Billy got ACC, but it was only 80 per cent of his wage. His wife had had to become his caregiver and support.

It was unacceptable to me that they should also be on a reduced income. So Aerospread kept Billy on full pay and topped up payments for his ongoing bills to try to ease the huge load on his family.

"But the way the system works, you have to pay your injured employee, and then ACC pays you back the 80 per cent. It was six months before we saw any money.

"Eventually, Billy and his family had to find another home for him, one with wheelchair access including wheelchair-accessible showers. That kind of place isn't easy to find and doesn't come cheap.

"So, if you want to do the right thing, there are a whole heap of costs not covered by the insurance."

Apart from helping Billy's family financially (the story has a happy ending, in that Billy was finally able to return to work mid-2016), there were plenty of other bills.

"There was the lease of replacement aircraft," says Bruce, "accommodation and living expenses for a stand-in pilot and crew, legal and accounting costs, insurance excess, and loss of earnings."

And over seven months, it took \$1.1 million to rebuild LTE.

Continued over >>



» Continued from previous page

Bruce counts himself lucky that Aerospread was able to financially weather being down one aircraft for so long.

"We were fortunate that we'd put money into assets that we could sell to help us stay out of too much debt."

Not only does the business have to be able to stay afloat financially, the CEO needs to be very resilient, Bruce believes.

"All your staff and their families, and your own family, are affected in all sorts of different ways. Stuff just comes from everywhere and anywhere, and it all loads up on you, particularly in a small operation. The pressure is huge, and you have to take a bit of time to look after your own needs."

Holding the line

Apart from the rather scary realisation that it takes a wad of money for a business to survive such an accident, and it takes a wad of personal strength for the CEO to cope with the emotional turmoil accompanying it, what else has Bruce learned?

The pilot pleaded guilty to a charge of flying in breach of his medical certificate by carrying a passenger, and flying in a manner that caused unnecessary endangerment. Bruce realised that a range of hidden failures had, over the years, crept into the pilot's flying.

"We do thousands of hours on our own. We've got to be disciplined and hold ourselves to account. We've got to drag ourselves above the minimum standards.

"But for this pilot, complacency had crept in over the years, 'oh, I won't put her into flight idle for takeoff, I'll do that after I get airborne, she'll be right.'

"'Oh, I don't need to tell the driver that I'm not allowed a passenger, I won't say anything, she'll be right.'

"'Oh, I can hop around the back of that fog and drop down, she'll be right. Been doing it for years, it won't happen to me.'

"Well," says Bruce grimly, "it bloody does happen.

"I've learned that passing a competency check does not mean I don't have bad habits creeping into my flying. I know I have to fly across that ridge at 100 kts, and during the competency check I do that. But maybe after a while, I'll pull that back to 90 kts, and then 80 kts. She'll be right...

"The rules are there for a good reason. If lower standards become the norm over time, an accident like this can absolutely be the outcome. It's up to each of us to maintain the safety margins and follow the rules.

"I've also learned about the value of onboard tracking. It costs less than a dollar an hour, and it saves lives. The paramedics were at the accident site 26 minutes after the emergency call. Without that tracking, Billy could have died.

"I've learned that belonging to an industry organisation, like the NZAAA, is worth all the subs I'll pay for the rest of my life, because of the thousands of dollars' worth of advice I got when I needed it the most.

"I've learned that planning ahead for something like this is time well spent. Being able to pluck out those prepared media releases, it was just fantastic, given everything going on at the time.

"I've learned you need to come to terms with how ACC works, and how much your insurer will pay. I've learned an employer needs to be financially secure, because there are a lot of bills.

"I've learned not to be shocked by people who won't care what you're going through.

"And I've learned that the CAA aren't the ogres I'd always heard. Well, not all the time," he grins. ■

Photo courtesy of Aerospread



Bruce Peterson.