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CLIFFORD'S NOTES

The tragic loss of former NBA superstar Kobe Bryant, his young daughter and seven others is particularly insufferable not only because of the parent-child passengers who shared so much love and promising futures, but because the cause of the Jan. 26 crash is likely a combination of factors extremely well-known in the aviation safety and accident investigation community.

In other words, this was another tragedy that could have been avoided.

The U.S. National Transportation Safety Board said the group was flying on a Sikorsky S-76B helicopter with one pilot in foggy, low-visibility weather in an area of mountainous terrain. Right away this highlights a high level of risk for a classic crash cause known as controlled flight into terrain.

Foggy, low-visibility weather makes it difficult to impossible for pilots to visually see terrain and obstacles in their flight path. Mountainous terrain presents obvious hazards in this regard that lead to higher accident rates than flat terrain. The workload for one pilot is higher than for two, especially in foggy, low-visibility weather with subsequently higher accident rates. This S-76B helicopter was about 29 years old and was delivered before the first Terrain Awareness Warning System — or TAWS — became available in the late 1990s and before the helicopter version of terrain awareness was perfected and made available in the 2000s.

Thousands of people have died in controlled flight into terrain crashes in airplanes and helicopters. The terrain awareness system has dramatically reduced such low-level crash rates since its installation in the aviation fleet but only for those aircraft so equipped.

The terrain warning system works by giving pilots a visual display of all terrain elevations around the aircraft with yellow and red coloring of threatening terrain along with aural warnings 30 to 60 seconds prior to any impact with terrain.

According to Honeywell — the inventor of the warning system — the cost to equip this helicopter with such a warning system could have ranged from \$30,000 to \$50,000 or more depending on safety options selected, but can one even put a price on people's lives?

Now comes the real tragedy. On March 24, 2006, after another Sikorsky S-76 crash in 2004, the National Transportation Safety Board recommended to the Federal Aviation Administration via Safety Recommendation A-06-019 that it "require all existing and new U.S.-registered turbine-



TAKE MORE ACTION

TAWS may have helped prevent tragic helicopter crash

By **BOB CLIFFORD**

powered rotorcraft certificated for six or more passenger seats to be equipped with a terrain awareness and warning system." That would have included this particular helicopter.

But the FAA declined to act and eight years later on Sept. 11, 2014, the safety board closed its safety recommendation in a "Closed — Unacceptable Action" status, effectively meaning the safety board and FAA were done and washing their hands of the matter, having taken no safety action.

The FAA agreed to require the warning system on air ambulance helicopters but didn't feel it was important enough to require on passenger helicopters like Bryant's as the safety board had recommended. The safety board will determine the cause of the crash that killed Bryant, his young daughter and seven others. This could take up to a year, according to investigators. It will look at every aspect, including the final words seconds before the crash when the pilot told air traffic control he was trying to avoid a cloud layer.

The helicopter was not equipped with the terrain warning system that would have sounded an alarm once the Sikorsky S-76B approached the ground, possibly giving the pilot time to pull up.

"Certainly, TAWS [the warning system] could have helped to provide information to the pilot on what terrain the pilot was flying in," said Jennifer Homendy, a member of the safety board, adding that the chopper missed clearing the fog-shrouded

hill by a mere 20 to 30 feet.

Now, a tragedy too late, U.S. Rep. Brad Sherman, D-Calif., has introduced legislation mandating that the warning system be installed in all operational helicopters. It is called the Kobe Bryant and Gianna Bryant Helicopter Safety Act.

Hopefully, this crash will spur the safety board to aggressively reopen its safety recommendation push to get all existing and new helicopters with six or more passenger seats to be equipped with such warning systems. Hopefully, the safety board will find ways to push industry and aircraft owners to install critical safety equipment to protect their loved ones regardless of FAA inaction.

Love and life are obviously worth spending \$50,000 for a critical safety feature to be installed. Do you think Bryant and his family would like to have known about this warning safety issue? Isn't that true of any person who boards a private helicopter for business or pleasure, particularly when they are joined by their loved ones and close friends?

The safety board should evolve and work with the public and industry to help get its message to decision-makers and aircraft owners regardless of what the FAA thinks or does in response to its safety recommendations. CL

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