

Petition Via Fax

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Cessna 206 seaplane

Seaplane Crash Renews Questions About Safety of Air Tour Industry

The crash of a seaplane in Key West again brings attention to the hazards particular to the air tour industry. The seaplane registered to Key West Seaplane Service is one in a fleet of planes used to bring tourists to the many excursions around Key West. This particular flight was scheduled to go to Fort Jefferson in the Dry Tortugas National park, which is only accessible by boat or plane.

In 1986 a collision of an airplane and helicopter performing scenic flights over the Grand Canyon, Arizona, and several subsequent air-tour accidents, raised concern at the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB). The NTSB launched an investigation which looked at 139 air-tour accidents in the United States as well as the regulatory framework for air tours, the effectiveness or past corrective actions and the use of emergency equipment on scenic flights. The goal of the investigation was to create measures and regulations which would increase the likelihood of occupant survival in any accidents that do occur. The tragedy on Sunday puts the focus back on the existing safety measures in the air-tour industry.

Five Die in Tragic Key West Seaplane Crash

Five people, four of them members of the same family, were killed March 17 when a seaplane crashed into shallow waters just 50 feet off the Key West shore. The only survivor from the crash was 10 year-old Matthew Blackburn, who was airlifted to Jackson Memorial Hospital in Miami. Last week he was transferred to a hospital in South Carolina.

Witnesses reported that the Cessna 206 Float Plane, which had just taken off, seemed to lose power, possibly sputtering in mid-air. The plane crashed into the shallow waters at about 12:30 p.m. EST. Immediately after the crash, cars pulled off the road and people ran into the water in an attempt to try to get the victims out of the plane, which sank upside-down.

Lynn Blackburn, father of the family, and seaplane pilot Keith Bellow, of Gretna, La., were both pronounced dead at the scene. Pamela Blackburn and two of her children, Jonathan, 6, and Martha, 3, died at the hospital.

The crash is the second seaplane accident in Key West in recent years. In 1994, a pilot and co-pilot were killed when their Chalk's seaplane crashed on takeoff. The seaplane was registered to Key West Seaplane Service, which carries passengers to Fort Jefferson in the Dry Tortugas, 70 miles away.



Vol. 1, No. 4
March 1996

A monthly facsimile to attorneys, clients and friends of **Leesfield Leighton & Rubio**

Hazards of Commuter Air Safety Require Attention

The recent crashes involving leisure and business commuter aircraft call into question the safety tolerances allowed by the FAA, manufacturers and the commuter operations themselves. In the past few years alone, there have been numerous fatal crashes of commuter aircraft that by all accounts were preventable.

Some of the reasons for the increasing number of crashes have more to do with economics than engineering capability. As operators press for greater profit levels, and manufacturers cut corners on production costs, the consuming public is increasingly exposed to unsafe commuter flights.

Key West has been the scene of several recent leisure aircraft crashes. In 1994 a Chalk's airlines seaplane crashed just after takeoff in Key West's harbor, killing both pilots.

The operator of this month's tragic flight, Key West Seaplane, has itself been involved in two known accidents, including a March 1994 incident where a seaplane crashed in three feet of water as it was taking off. In February 1984 six people were injured when a Key West Seaplane also bound for the Dry Tortugas crashed just off Key West.

Less than four weeks ago two men were killed when their ultralight leisure plane used for tourists crashed into the ocean near Islamorada in the Florida Keys.

Leesfield Leighton & Rubio Continues to Fight American Airlines in Colombia Crash Case

In what promises to be one of the most contentious aviation cases in years, Leesfield Leighton & Rubio attorneys have brought suit on behalf of several families of the victims of American Airlines flight 965 which crashed in the mountains of Colombia. 160 people perished in the crash. The case has been consolidated for discovery in Miami's United States District Court.

The December 20, 1995 tragedy will be the first litigated since the agreement by the International Air Transport Association to adopt the "Intercarrier Agreement on Passenger Liability" in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia on October 31, 1995. The agreement eliminates the \$75,000 cap on damages previous in effect under the Warsaw Convention for international flights.

The new agreement is not set to go into effect until November 1, 1996, though each airline has the option of waiving the damage cap. American has not indicated that it will voluntarily waive the Warsaw cap in this case, raising the likelihood of the need to litigate the issue of willful misconduct on the part of American, which is the purpose of the Warsaw cap.



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