

EXTRA EYES



A couple of occurrences last year serve as a good reminder of the importance ground handlers play in aviation safety.



“It was just a normal turnaround at Dunedin, and I remember the dispatcher actually saw me doing the (aircraft) walkaround,” recalls Ian Munro, an airline training manager at Air New Zealand.

He’s talking about a typical day in August last year, when a Mount Cook Airline flight was getting ready for departure from Dunedin. Ian considers his walkarounds very thorough.

But something didn’t look quite right to ground dispatcher Noorua Metua that day. When the flight crew were on the flight deck preparing for departure, she advised Ian over the intercom that she thought the nose gear doors looked different to how they did on other aircraft.

“So the first officer hopped out and he said, ‘yes it does look slightly different’ so we got the engineer across and he had a look and measured all the tolerances,” says Ian.

It turned out one of the nose doors was slightly lower than the other but it was still within tolerances. So in the end there was no issue, and the flight departed as normal.

“But I just thought it was fantastic the ground dispatcher actually had the gumption to raise it – even knowing that I had done a visual inspection myself, and she had seen me doing that – I thought it was really great,” says Ian.

Noorua Metua, who has been in the job since November 2017, is methodical about what she does.

“I did my walkaround and I just noticed they [the nose gear doors] looked a bit odd because one looked lower than it should be.”

Noorua says she has a mental checklist she goes through.

“We get told what to look out for and what’s not right.”

Was she shy about speaking up?

“Not really, because even if it’s something little, I prefer to ask. It doesn’t worry me if it means nothing, even though I’m shy. It’s for my peace of mind and for the passengers and the pilot and the plane and everyone here. It doesn’t worry me if it’s nothing, I would rather be safe.”

Noorua’s brother, Rorua Metua, happens to be the ramp manager at Mount Cook in Dunedin.

“Our ground handling staff are well-trained. They go through a standard operating procedure, a proper ‘this is how you check the plane, this is how you work around the plane’ so there are specific steps. It’s a mental checklist because there are so many different things to look out for,” says Rorua.

// It’s for my peace of mind and for the passengers and the pilot and the plane and everyone here. It doesn’t worry me if it’s nothing, I would rather be safe. //

“You’re looking for those indicators to make sure the plane is okay, and if something is unusual then you speak up about it and say ‘can you guys have a look at this?’

“It’s really pleasing when the person involved, even though they might be quite shy like Noorua, with the training she got, she spoke up.”

It’s okay to question

Ian Munro says ground handlers are very diligent, observant people who play an important role in safety.

“You can appreciate that, while safety is always paramount, turnarounds are a hive of activity with a lot happening. But Noorua was still doing the right thing, looking around.”

The thing that really impressed him was Noorua’s ability to question.

Ian says she did exactly what they expect ground handlers to do.

“It can probably be a little bit daunting actually, seeing the captain kneel down and do a visual inspection and then, you know, it could be seen as a challenge to what the captain has viewed as acceptable. But it wasn’t – she’s backed it up and questioned things, I thought that was great.” »

A must-have

In May last year, a ground handler in Wellington noticed something unusual on an Air Nelson-operated aircraft after pushback.

He reported a pin in the nosewheel assembly was sticking out about 50 mm.

Engineering was phoned and after some discussion it was decided to return to the gate and shut down.

// **Every single skill our staff in the ground handler team complete is revalidated inside a three year period.** //

On inspection, an engineer found the nosewheel lower castor cover hinge was broken. A defect log was raised and all passengers were transferred to another aircraft. The first officer reported he did not notice the pin sticking out as the push back tug was connected to the nose wheel.

Chris Ancell is the training consultant in Wellington with the School of Ground Operations for Air New Zealand.

He remembers the incident and says ground handlers provide a vital role.

“They are an extra set of eyes for the flight crews and the engineers. The engineers can’t meet every single aircraft so having ground handling teams fills a gap I guess. It’s not a nice to have, it’s a must have, because if we’re not helping perform that role then things could slip through the cracks.”

He says training is an ongoing thing with regular refreshers.

“Every single skill our staff in the ground handler team complete is revalidated inside a three-year period.”

As a trainer, Chris says he can’t emphasize enough the importance of speaking up.

“Absolutely – safety first. Better to check it and it be nothing, rather than not check it and it be something.” //



Photo courtesy of Mark Doherty.

// Noorua Metua spoke up when she spotted a difference in the nose gear doors.