

Ballooning Safety P

It was, at the time, the world's deadliest single hot air ballooning disaster* but operators and the CAA say it has forever changed – and for the better – ballooning safety in New Zealand.

The Carterton tragedy at 7:22 am, 7 January 2012, took the lives of the 53-year old pilot, Lance Hopping, and his 10 passengers after ZK-XXF made contact with power lines on a rural Wairarapa road, and incinerated.

CAA's Special Flight Operations and Recreational Aviation manager, Rex Kenny, says while Carterton was a terrible tragedy, its aftermath has been positive for the industry.

"Operators were horrified by what happened. It was the strongest possible message about risk-taking that you could ever hope to send. A man with almost 1100 flying hours, and held in high regard by the sector, tried this ridiculous manoeuvre (trying to outclimb an entanglement with power lines), something just beyond belief, and it had catastrophic consequences."

"I think Carterton had everybody looking hard at their operations," says Martyn Stacey of Aoraki Balloon Safaris in Methven.

"Everyone was checking their expositions, and making sure that what they said they were going to do, they and their pilots were actually doing. Then they could either say 'yeah we're OK' or 'we've got to make changes to the way we do things, like how we fly around power lines.'"

Mark Brown of Hamilton-based Kiwi Ballooning Company had just completed a flight with passengers when he heard of the accident, about an hour after it happened. "It was not easy to carry on with the traditional post-flight bubbles and snacks. The crew and I were quite distraught," he says.

But he agrees Carterton focused the attention of balloonists everywhere.

"After the accident I reflected on how quickly things can change during flight and I reviewed every aspect of my flying to determine there was no room for error."

Martyn, who was president of the Ballooning Aviation Association of New Zealand (BAANZ) at the time,

* February 2013, Luxor Egypt – 19 deaths

* August 1989, Alice Springs, Australia – 13 deaths, when two balloons collided.

Post-Carterton

says Carterton also gave private operators pause for thought.

"They said, 'Wow, these things can happen.' And they looked at themselves and how they were flying, and I think they just take a bit more care now.

"If every pilot is really honest with themselves, somewhere along the line they've hit a wire fence, or a telephone line. Or even worse. Carterton was a wake-up call in that respect."

Commercial ballooning is not as lucrative as it was before 2008 and the advent of the global financial crisis. But both operators say it's hard to know if that's because some prospective passengers feel they can't afford a ride, or whether it is, latterly anyway, the 'Carterton effect'.

Mark Brown says some tourists continue to talk about the tragedy but most seem to have moved on.

"The fear remains a bit with those who were unsure anyway about the safety of going up. You will probably never get them up in a balloon now."

He says that generally, however, people seem to regard ballooning as pretty safe.

The nature of ballooning puts safety largely in the hands of the operator. There isn't a lot that can go mechanically wrong with such a simple aircraft. While that's reassuring to

the public, it also means little control if something goes wrong. It puts the onus on the pilot to fly as expertly as possible.

Mark Brown says he flies as safely as he possibly can.

"I don't think I could do it any more carefully than I do post-Carterton. I think twice about flying now, say, when the weather is more unstable than normal, and with maybe borderline higher wind conditions.

"I just call it off. There's always another day."

Martyn Stacey says passengers ask a lot more questions now, especially New Zealanders.

"How many hours has the pilot flown? Is their medical certificate current? They're questions anyone can, and should, ask anyway. Pilots have to carry their licences and medical certificates when they fly," he says.

The new rules covering Adventure Aviation – Part 115 – had been in play for three months by January 2012 but companies had been given six months to comply with it. Lance Hopping's Early Morning Balloons had yet to begin that certification process.

Martyn says Part 115 has done "amazing things" for the adventure aviation sector, including ballooning.

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Mark Brown says because of Carterton, he's more ready to call a balloon flight off if conditions are not good.

"There's always another day," he says.



"For instance, training used to be quite random, but each operator now has a very robust, thorough, formalised programme to get people to the standard where they can fly as a single pilot with passengers. The ground crew also has set training."

The Transport Accident Investigation Commission (TAIC), which found the accident was due to pilot error, could not discount the possible effect on Lance Hopping's judgement, of a small amount of cannabis found in his system. TAIC said the quantity was consistent with Hopping having smoked the drug four to six hours before the fatal flight.

Rex Kenny said that finding, and an earlier one that two skydiving instructors who died with seven others in the 2010 Fox Glacier accident, also had cannabis in their systems, led to Part 115 being beefed up.

"It's now mandatory for each operator under 115 to have a drug and alcohol testing programme."

Both Mark Brown and Martyn Stacey say they were shocked by the revelation that Hopping had cannabis in his system, with Martyn observing that formalising drug and alcohol testing, as part of the rule, can only be a good thing.

"I've always had testing in my company, but some family businesses weren't bothered. But now we all have to do it. You just accept it as part of the operation.

"It also gives the public confidence in what we do."

Rex Kenny still shakes his head in disbelief at Lance Hopping's decision to try to outclimb the power lines with which the Cameron A210 balloon came into contact, rather than use the recommended rapid descent procedure.

Martyn says since the Carterton tragedy, as the flight director of balloon fiestas around the country, at every pre-flight briefing he has reiterated safety procedures when flying near powerlines.

"The safety message has always been there, but now we're making sure they really do know what to do about power line contact or pre-power line contact."

The media made much of the fact that Hopping didn't have a current medical certificate. But there appears to be agreement that it would've had no material effect on the Carterton flight. But as TAIC said, "It did show a disregard for complying with the rules."

Rex Kenny says it's still the responsibility of the operator to keep their medical certificate current. However, as part of increased CAA auditing, inspectors do check.

"I'd had quite a bit to do with Lance professionally, he was always at the fiestas and at least one year he was safety officer. He was never backward in pointing the finger at other operators if he thought they were flying unsafely and the sector held him in high regard.

"What happened with Lance Hopping really was down to 'human factors'. We can't check every flight and every pilot every time they go up, and the sector would not want us to."

However, Rex is confident Part 115 is doing its job. "When it first came in, we did have a couple of companies – one of them a long-standing operator – that couldn't make the grade. And they were ones we were always a bit concerned about. Part 115 does give us the ability to follow through on operators we have issues with."

Since 115 came in and the demise of those two operators, a fresh ballooning company has entered the market, taking the commercial ballooning community to just four (there are close to 70 private balloonists in BAANZ).

Mark Brown says he occasionally talks to other commercial operators about safety issues. That was particularly so after the Carterton accident.

"As a group we came to the conclusion that in similar circumstances we would have more than likely 'vented and dropped the balloon' rather than try to rise up and go over." ■