

The May 4 explosion of a Transmile Airlines B727 at Bangalore, India, in which a wing tank exploded as the airplane was being repositioned for ground maintenance, seemed to bolster the NTSB position. In a July 20 letter to the FAA, the NTSB, which was supporting a probe by Indian aviation authorities, said investigation of the incident "revealed that the ignition occurred where [fuel] pump motor wires had melted though aluminum conduit, exposing the fuel vapors to potential ignition energy." Although the aircraft had been modified in accordance with an FAA directive to prevent the wiring problem, the design change was clearly ineffective. Inerting is necessary, the NTSB said.

The NTSB recommendations appear to be further supported by the April 3 crash of a U.S. Air Force C-5 jet transport at Dover Air Force Base in Delaware. The C-5 has an inerting system. The airplane crashed, but it did not erupt into a fuel-fed fireball. Even though the crew was soaked in jet fuel, all 17 aboard were able to escape the wreckage.

The aviation industry has responded that its recent efforts to eliminate ignition sources are sufficient to ensure safety, although the Transmile incident suggests otherwise. The U.S. industry remains flatly opposed to a costly program to retrofit the existing fleet with inerting systems, and the Europeans are opposed to requiring such systems on new planes such as the A380. The problem with the industry's approach is that if reducing ignition sources is not sufficiently effective, inerting would still guard against catastrophic failure. Consider it the belt and suspenders approach to safety.

The Families of the TWA Flight 800 Association have asked: "Can the airline industry and FAA afford another mass loss of life similar to this accident?"

Unfortunately, it may take another disaster on the scale of TWA 800 to re-energize the effort to make fuel tanks truly safe through inerting. (*Opinion Story by Dave Evans, Newsday*)

MAINTENANCE WORKERS TO DOUBLE AS FIREFIGHTERS

EAU CLAIRE, Wisconsin (USA) - The Chippewa Valley Regional Airport will be discontinuing its on-location fire service in one month and replacing the firefighters with airport maintenance workers.

The airport's manager, Charity Speich, says that this move is not uncommon and that in Wisconsin, Rhineland's airport has also decided to take this route. She says, "Safety is a huge concern, but like I said, we're doing the same training as what we require, the

FAA would require of our current fire protection."

Some people are concerned with the decision to drop certified firefighters for maintenance workers including Chippewa Fire Protection District Chief John Neihart, who says, "Anytime there is an incident at the airport and it is a severe situation, having the fastest response of trained personnel mitigates the situation as soon as possible."

Eliminating the fire service is part of cost-cutting measures being made by the airport in order to line up funding for the new control tower. The airport says this is a "proactive" approach to combating fires, while the fire service is "reactive," dealing with fires after they occur. Neihart says a tower will not help prevent fires since most fires at the airport are the result of equipment failures and break out after the aircraft has already landed.

STUDY RAISES QUESTIONS ABOUT MALL, AIRPORT DEFIBRILLATORS

CHICAGO - A review of safety data raises questions about the reliability of the heart zappers that hang on the walls of airports, shopping malls and health clubs.

Harvard Medical School researchers found that over the past decade, one in five automated external defibrillators were recalled because of the potential for malfunction, and devices that failed were associated with 370 deaths.

Nevertheless, the devices have saved tens of thousands of lives, and the benefits outweigh the risk of malfunctions, said study author Dr. William Maisel.

"The number of malfunctions may be alarming to some, but you have to take it in the context of the large number of patients saved by these devices," he said.

He said the study -- the first comprehensive look at safety data on the devices -- underscores the importance of properly maintaining the defibrillators.

The American Heart Association estimates that 900 Americans die each day from sudden cardiac arrest. Defibrillators are meant to revive people by delivering a shock that restores a normal heart rhythm. Combined with cardiopulmonary resuscitation, the easy-to-use devices can keep victims alive until emergency crews arrive.

In a 2004 study, the devices helped raise the cardiac arrest survival rate to 23 percent, compared with 14 percent with CPR alone.