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Major charter airline flew illegally, review says

Long-delayed release of secret Transport Canada document on Nationair reveals planes operated without airworthiness certificates

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The Globe and Mail

TORONTO — Nationair, once Canada's largest charter airline, illegally flew planes containing safety defects, had overworked staff and deferred repairing problems on its aircraft "beyond reasonable time periods," says a confidential Transport Canada safety review of the company.

The review was conducted in August, 1991, shortly after a Nationair plane crashed in Saudi Arabia, killing all 263 people on board in the worst accident involving a Canadian plane.

Nationair went bankrupt in 1993. But the safety review was released yesterday under a Federal Court of Appeal order obtained by Ken Rubin, an Ottawa public-interest researcher who

requested the document under the Access to Information Act and fought a 6¼-year battle to obtain it.

The document painted a picture of Nationair as a problem airline whose flight attendants told interviewers that they "were very nervous" about flying on its planes and found it "nerve-racking."

The document prompted Mr. Rubin to criticize Transport Canada for lax oversight of the carrier. "Why was the safety state of Nationair allowed to deteriorate? Why was the operator not suspended then and the public not informed then of the dangers?" he asked.

The airline operated for two years after the damning findings by transport officials.

However, Transport Canada issued

a statement yesterday saying air travellers were not at risk because of the safety lapses, which it said were corrected.

Company maintenance managers "were found to be very knowledgeable in their respective technical areas of responsibilities. Their corrective action plan and Transport Canada's follow-up ensured that safety was not compromised," the department said.

Although Transport Canada praised the maintenance managers, the safety review indicated that "pilots and flight attendants are losing confidence in the capability of the maintenance organization to handle their job," according to the document.

Moreover, the review noted that the airline's director of flight safety "has

received no specific aviation-safety training and has been assigned other duties."

The federal government tried to keep the document secret, arguing that its safety program would be compromised if airlines and their staff were not assured of confidentiality in their dealings with transport officials. The department ended those types of safety reviews in 1994, but continues a more formal process of airline inspection.

The safety review raises questions about the effectiveness of Transport Canada in monitoring the company.

For instance, the review said the DC-8 aircraft transport officials sampled "revealed that there was a poor fundamental maintenance standard

practices. This indicates that maintenance inspection and standards fall below the acceptable conditions of issue for the certificate of airworthiness."

Planes require such a certificate to be able to legally fly, but Nationair put its aircraft aloft even when it did not comply with this regulation.

"It has been determined that some aircraft had operated when the certificate of airworthiness was not in force due to missed, inaccurate release certifications and failure to rectify defects," the review said.

Among its other findings, the safety review noted it was "quite common" for planes to be used for two to three weeks while needed maintenance was deferred.

Nationair began operating in 1984, and from then until 1991 "no aviation safety-management program was in place and none was required by regulation."

The review also discovered through logbooks and interviews with staff that during the Saudi Arabia operation, flight crews "were operating in excess of a 15-hour duty day."

Some aircraft were also found to have seats fastened with incorrect bolts.

According to the review, pilots and flight attendants interviewed "emphatically stated that 'we have lost confidence in the maintenance organization'; 'carrying the same cabin snags and deferrals for consecutive flights is nerve-racking.'"