

Fraser Island plane crash pilot defends Air Fraser safety record after ditching plane in ocean

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Photo: What remains of the plane is removed from the beach. (Facebook: Fifty shades of Fraser Island)

The owner and pilot of the company involved in a light plane crash off the eastern side of Queensland's Fraser Island yesterday says a string of recent incidents is an unfortunate "chain of events" and his company meets all safety standards.

Key points:

- Pilot Gerry Geltch says the plane that crashed was the newest in their fleet
- The ATSB is yet to decide whether it will conduct a full investigation
- Air Fraser has been subject to three other recent incident investigations

The Cessna 206 was on a training exercise when it ditched into the ocean near Happy Valley on the eastern side of the island about 1:30pm yesterday.

Pilot Gerry Geltch and his trainee pilot passenger escaped with minor injuries and swam ashore before being flown to Hervey Bay Hospital as a precaution.

Australian Transport Safety Bureau (ATSB) investigators are gathering information on what caused the crash before they make a decision on whether to conduct a full air safety investigation.



Photo: Gerry Geltch says he only had 30 seconds to decide what to do. (Linked In)

Mr Geltch said the plane was the newest in Air Fraser's fleet and only purchased two weeks ago.

"All the paperwork was intact," he said.

"There's been claims that we've been grounded by CASA (the Civil Aviation Safety Authority) or ATSB, but that's not true and we are working as per usual.

"Unfortunately it's just been one of those chain of events that have happened and it's been heavily investigated by the ATSB because our operation is a very unique operation. They've come up with a clean bill of health."

Previous investigations

Air Fraser has been the subject of three other ATSB investigations into its operations.

The ATSB began an investigation into what led to one of Air Fraser's eight-seater planes overrunning a runway near Happy Valley on January 2, with a report due later this year.

It has also been investigating what caused another Air Fraser plane's landing gear to fail in August 2019, an incident that resulted in minor damage to the plane.



Photo: The wrecked plane washed up on the beach at Fraser Island on Thursday morning. (Facebook: Fifty shades of Fraser Island)

A separate incident in November 2018 resulted in a door flying off a GA-8 aircraft.

A full ATSB investigation of the latest incident would be the fifth involving Air Fraser since 1995.

'I exited through the rear door'

Mr Geltch said the aircraft had passed all safety checks, but suffered engine failure during their training flight, and he decided to ditch the plane in the ocean.

"The engine failed and that's where the problem really started to escalate ... and we had no other alternative other than to put it in the ocean," he said.

Mr Geltch said he only had about 30 seconds to make the call on what to do.

"You're trained for emergency procedures and forced landings ... so you just go into that training survival mode.

"After it landed in the water the other pilot, Tommy, exited through the window and I exited through the rear door."



Photo: Wreckage from the plane being carted away from the beach near Happy Valley.

The pair then swam about 150 metres to shore, where they were met by emergency services and treated for minor injuries.

"Tommy got a few stitches in his forehead and I got a few stitches in my shin, we're missing a bit of skin here and there, but it's all good."

Carolyn Elder from Fraser Island towing said the wreckage was removed after it washed up on the beach on Thursday morning.

"The tail of the airplane had been snapped off, whether that was from the water, we're not sure," she said.

"Obviously it spent a night in the water and it's not in the best condition but it was able to be recovered.

"There were a few bystanders taking photos and videos it was an interesting recovery for people to watch."

A broader problem

Associate Professor Geoff Dell from CQ University's accident, forensic and investigation crash laboratory said recent incidents pointed to broader issues in the industry.

He said high operating costs had placed downward pressure on profits for many small operators, which has resulted in less frequent flights and delays in maintenance.

"There's always been pressure on costs and at the moment that seems to have increased and so there's always this pressure on reducing the amount of things that people do," he said.

"It's not an overt decision not to do maintenance but there's certainly evidence of trying to wring the absolute maximum out of whatever the operational circumstance is to minimise costs and that permeates every other aspect of the operation.

"I'm not suggesting that's the case in this latest crash, but there's definitely downward pressure [on revenue] more so now than before."

Mr Geltch said the aviation industry had experienced a number of high-profile incidents in recent months.

"Take into mind while the fires have been on we've [the industry] lost three helicopters [and] one big jet. We've had a helicopter go into the ocean near Newcastle before Christmas and a plane go into the ocean at Caloundra," he said.

"There's been quite a few aviation incidents across the country. Ours have been very minor compared to everything else, it's just that we're high profile because of where we are."



Photo: Mr Geltch says he went into survival training mode as the plane went down. (Facebook: Fifty shades of Fraser Island)

Associate Professor Dell said offering mortgage-like loans to operators for new aircraft would improve equipment standards.

"In the US, you can get finance for a plane over 25 years — more like a house mortgage — reducing the repayment demand significantly compared to in Australia where it's treated like a car loan, which puts downwards pressure on companies buying new aircraft," he said.

"I think that would make a big difference to the equipment that's being operated. Access to the latest technology generally equates to higher safety margins."

Extracted from:

<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-01-30/pilot-of-crashed-air-fraser-plane-speaks-prior-incidents/11913470>

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