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## The Piper Lance tragedy

## Is only the pilot to blame?

By Gillian Bartolo

When people take a trip on a private plane, they like to know that the plane is licensed to take fee-paying passengers and that the pilot is responsible. They have a right to know.

A board of inquiry has just put all the blame for an ill-fated flight from Djerba to Malta on the pilot. But the inquiry report itself raises other questions, in particular: Could the Department of Civil Aviation (DCA) have done more to avoid the Piper Lance tragedy?

Carmelo Bartolo, the pilot in question, had two companies, Excelair and Sun Aviation. Excelair had been granted a five-year licence in 1993 to carry fare-paying passengers. The Piper Lance aircraft, registration number 9H-ABU, was a single engine aircraft owned by Sun Aviation, of whom Carmelo Bartolo was the director. He also flew the plane. No permit was ever issued to Sun Aviation and therefore no permit was issued for the Piper Lance to carry fare-paying passengers.

Aviation sources said that single engine aircraft are not normally given permission to carry fare-paying passengers over a wide stretch of sea, such as that between Malta and Catania and Malta and Djerba, because of the associated risks. But for some time there had been

over the sea not from an adjoining field. And planes are at their most fee-paying on board, such as, transporting. And he was also because about the



The Piper Lance aircraft lost while flying from Djerba to Malta

sengers for a reward, notwithstanding that Sun Aviation did not have the required air service licence. There is confirmation to this effect from police investigations and other documents on record. One airport source told *The Malta Independent* on Sunday that this was "an open secret".

There were several witnesses. Richard Tui, managing director of Unique Travels told the board of inquiry his company had transported arrangements with Excelair for MAPEL personnel since summer 1994. He also told them that the Piper Lance was used to ferry passengers from Malta to Djerba.

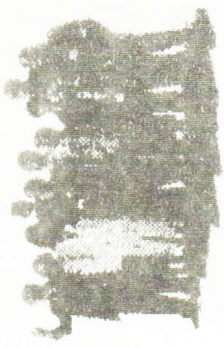
He said "travel arrangements and agreements on charges were done verbally". Furthermore, the families of the deceased also said the com-

people on witness again. The board of inquiry has been in Malta this week. It is not a matter of whether the pilot is not at fault. It is not a matter of whether the pilot is not at fault.

If so many knew or had well-founded suspicions why did the DCA not take further and decisive action?

Acting DCA Director Carmelo Sultana said the DCA "followed up rumours. But the DCA did not carry out its investigations. Says Sultana: "We short-circuited the procedure and asked the police to commence investigations directly".

This attitude was so old that the investigating officer Victor Gauci told the board of inquiry that "the DCA had an obligation to investigate from their end and assist the police in this matter". In the contrary in a letter about investigations he had conducted into allegations of illegal payments by sun-le engine private aircraft, Gauci said that when his department submitted a



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tana in early October, requested him to submit the legislation including sections which picks like Carmelo Bartolo may have broken. Mr Sultana had failed to reply.

If such activities were arising, suspicion why was Bartolo allowed to continue to fly? Why did the DCA fail to stop him flying the Piper Lance on similar flights?

Why was the board of inquiry composed of individuals who, albeit experts in the own right, were directly involved in aviation operations? Would it not have been better if an independent and autonomous body carried out the investigation?

In the absence of an independent civil aviation authority such as that found in the UK and US, it might have been difficult to do otherwise. Carmelo Bartolo is dead and cannot defend himself. But as Carmelo

Attard said, the Department of Civil Aviation owes the public an explanation, and the public should put stop to this "Maltese way of doing things" before there are more