he tragic loss of former NBA super-
star Kobe Bryant, his young daugh-
ter and seven others is particularly
insufferable not only because of the
parent-child passengers who
shared so much love and promising futures, but
because the cause of the Jan. 26 crash is likely a
combination of factors extremely well-known in
the aviation safety and accident investigation
community.

In other words, this was another tragedy that
could have been avoided.

The U.S. National Transportation Safety Board
said the group was flying on a Sikorsky S-76B hel-
cicopter with one pilot in foggy, low-visibility weath-
er in an area of mountainous terrain. Right away
this highlights a high level of risk for a classic crash
cause known as controlled flight into terrain.

Foggy, low-visibility weather makes it difficult to
impossible for pilots to visually see terrain and
obstacles in their flight path. Mountainous terrain
presents obvious hazards in this regard that lead to
higher accident rates than flat terrain. The work-
load for one pilot is higher than for two, especially
in foggy, low-visibility weather with subsequently
higher accident rates. This S-76B helicopter was
about 29 years old and was delivered before the
first Terrain Awareness Warning System — or TAWS — became available in the late 1990s and
before the helicopter version of terrain awareness
was perfected and made available in the 2000s.

Thousands of people have died in controlled
flight into terrain crashes in airplanes and heli-
copters. The terrain awareness system has dra-
matically reduced such low-level crash rates since
its installation in the aviation fleet but only for
those aircraft so equipped.

The terrain warning system works by giving pi-
lots a visual display of all terrain elevations around
the aircraft with yellow and red coloring of threat-
ening terrain along with aural warnings 30 to 60
seconds prior to any impact with terrain.

According to Honeywell — the inventor of the
warning system — the cost to equip this helicopter
with such a warning system could have ranged
from $30,000 to $50,000 or more depending on
safety options selected, but can one even put a
price on people’s lives?

Now comes the real tragedy. On March 24,
2006, after another Sikorsky S-76 crash in 2004,
the National Transportation Safety Board recom-
manded to the Federal Aviation Administration via
Safety Recommendation A-06-019 that it “re-
quire all existing and new U.S.-registered turbine-
powered rotorcraft certificated for six or more pas-
senger seats to be equipped with a terrain aware-
ness and warning system.” That would have in-
cluded this particular helicopter.

But the FAA declined to act and eight years later
on Sept. 11, 2014, the safety board closed its safety
recommendation in a “Closed — Unacceptable Ac-
tion” status, effectively meaning the safety board
and FAA were done and washing their hands of the
matter, having taken no safety action.

The FAA agreed to require the warning system
on air ambulance helicopters but didn’t feel it was
important enough to require on passenger heli-
copters like Bryant’s as the safety board had rec-
ommended. The safety board will determine the
cause of the crash that killed Bryant, his young
daughter and seven others. This could take up to a
year, according to investigators. It will look at ev-
evry aspect, including the final words seconds be-
fore the crash when the pilot told air traffic control
he was trying to avoid a cloud layer.

The helicopter was not equipped with the ter-
rain warning system that would have sounded an
alarm once the Sikorsky S-76B approached the
ground, possibly giving the pilot time to pull up.

“Certainly, TAWS [the warning system] could
have helped to provide information to the pilot on
what terrain the pilot was flying in,” said Jennifer
Homeny, a member of the safety board, adding
that the chopper missed clearing the fog-shrouded
hill by a mere 20 to 30 feet.

Now, a tragedy too late, U.S. Rep. Brad Sher-
man, D-Calif., has introduced legislation mandat-
ing that the warning system be installed in all op-
erational helicopters. It is called the Kobe Bryant
and Gianna Bryant Helicopter Safety Act.

Hopefully, this crash will spur the safety board
to aggressively reopen its safety recommendation
push to get all existing and new helicopters with
six or more passenger seats to be equipped with
such warning systems. Hopefully, the safety board
will find ways to push industry and aircraft owners
to install critical safety equipment to protect their
loved ones regardless of FAA inaction.

Love and life are obviously worth spending
$50,000 for a critical safety feature to be installed.

Do you think Bryant and his family would like to have
known about this warning safety issue? Isn’t that
true of any person who boards a private helicopter
for pleasure, particularly when they are
joined by their loved ones and close friends?

The safety board should evolve and work with
the public and industry to help get its message to
decision-makers and aircraft owners regardless of
what the FAA thinks or does in response to its
safety recommendations. CL

By BOB CLIFFORD

TAWS may have helped prevent tragic helicopter crash

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