

Navigation aid is faulty

Lives of those who fly at risk

*Weekend Argus
Sun. 13/12/92
p.8*

■ Pilots who rely on ground-based navigation aids could find themselves hopelessly lost as the signals they receive are distorted. The authorities have warned of this hazard, but have done little more.

MARK STANSFIELD
Weekend Argus Reporter

THE lives of aircraft pilots and passengers are in danger because navigation beacons installed by civil aviation authorities are faulty, it has been alleged.

The Department of Civil Aviation warned the aviation world in April that some ground-based navigation-aid beacons were transmitting signals that some receivers distorted.

Pilots locking on to these beacons could find themselves hopelessly lost. Their receivers could misinterpret the signal and send the pilot in the opposite direction.

Serious bearing errors were common, as were sluggish operation of the aircraft's deviation bar and sometimes proper direction radials with a warning flag showing. Some of these malfunctions were simultaneous.

These crucial instruments are used by smaller commercial airlines and private pilots — particularly in bad weather. Aviation experts say that about 90 percent of smaller aircraft using South African airspace are fitted with receivers that could malfunction because of the beacons, known as VOR's (Very High Frequency Omni-direction finders).

An earlier warning was issued by the Department of Civil Aviation in October last year.

British aviation authorities warned their pilots about similar equipment failure 17 years ago, and it is believed destroyed the faulty system so

that it could not find its way back into use via the second-hand market.

The Department of Civil Aviation warned that VORs installed at Jan Smuts, Louis Botha and Swellendam (the air corridor to D F Malan) had been found to be malfunctioning. These beacons are not used by major airlines.

The department's chief director, Stuart Huckwell, said certain aircraft receivers needed to be adjusted to cope with the mis-information fed into them.

He denied that Britain had stopped using the equipment and said five such VORs were still in operation there.

Weekend Argus, however, has a British civil aviation circular warning British pilots that at least five VORs in Britain and three in Holland and Belgian were malfunctioning in the same way as those in South Africa. The British civil aviation warning was issued in April, 1975 — about 17 years before the South African authority issued its first warning.

Now South African pilots suspect that small aircraft crashes — such as the Piper Seneca found wrecked in the Drakensberg seven months after it took off from Richard's Bay in "atrocious" weather with highly-experienced pilot Keith Page at the controls — could have been caused by faulty directional signals.

Mr Page's aircraft disappeared on October 19, 1990. It was found in the Drakensberg on May 2, 1991. The first warning about faulty VORs was issued in October the same year.