

Aviation is a remarkable industry, but its achievements have largely become invisible. Air travel is often merely an interruption – and sometimes of an uncomfortable one – in our busy schedules. It has become entirely unremarkable to span half the globe in a single sitting: to eat dinner, catch a movie, enjoy a few glasses of wine and perhaps a short nap while being propelled at 900 km an hour, suspended 10 km above the Earth. As it happens, I am writing this article in the departure terminal of a large airport, waiting to do just that. Few of the people around me seem awestruck by the marvels of the jet age, at least outwardly or appear to be waiting in terror, or even mild trepidation, despite our impending launch into the sky.

One of the most remarkable things about modern commercial aviation is the way it has tamed the considerable risks of transporting huge numbers of people at high velocity across the inhospitable reaches of the lower stratosphere. The safety record of modern air travel is striking. Accidents involving large commercial jet planes remain extremely rare, with only sixteen fatal accidents in over 65 million hours of flight in 2013.

The recent loss of a Boeing 777 in March 2014, likely somewhere in the Indian Ocean, and the apparent downing of another over Ukraine in July 2014 are deeply tragic events. One of the most compelling and horrifying

