Flight 752: collateral damage

One of the main causes of death for airline passengers in recent decades is being shot down by somebody's military. Not the very biggest, of course: accidents account for nine-tenths of all deaths in civilian airline crashes, and terrorist attacks and hijackings cause most of the rest. But a solid 2.5% of the deaths are due to trigger-happy people in military uniforms..

.That's 1,379 passengers killed in commercial airliners that were shot down because they were off-course or simply mis-identified, out of a total of 57,767 deaths in all the ?major incidents' (more than 50 deaths) in aviation history.

The first was an El Al plane that strayed into Bulgarian airspace in 1955, the second an off-course Libyan airliner shot down by Israel over the Sinai Peninsula in 1973. The last of the military shoot-downs in which actual fighters were involved was an off-track Korean Air Lines jumbo jet shot down by a Soviet fighter in 1983. All 269 passengers and crew were killed.

Since then the killing has been done by surface-to-air missiles, with no visual identification. The first of these was in 1988, when the U.S. Navy ship Vincennes, operating illegally in Iran's territorial waters, shot down an Iran Air jet bound for Dubai with 290 people aboard in the mistaken belief that it was a fighter plane. They all died.

Ukrainian Air Force missiles shot down a Siberia Airlines flight over the Black Sea in 2001 during a military exercise, killing 78. In 2014 Russian-backed rebels fighting in eastern Ukraine shot down a Malaysian Airlines plane and killed all 298 passengers and crew.

And now 176 people, the great majority of them Canadian citizens or residents, have been killed just off the end of the runway in Tehran by a young Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps technician who thought he was shooting down an American drone. At least his commander acknowledged his personal responsibility ? ?I wish I was dead? ? but the Iranian government lied about it for three days.

Technically, this kind of mistake is inexcusable. You don't even need high-cost military technology: a free Swedish app called Flight Radar 24 will give you real-time flight data on your phone for all civilian airliners in the air in your vicinity. What we are dealing with here is mostly human error ? but human error driven by paranoid politics and huge time pressure.

You can't do anything about the time pressure: decisions really do sometimes have to be made in seconds if you suspect that you have a ?hostile' incoming on the radar. The paranoia might be easier to address in principle, but it's equally inevitable in practice: all the shoot-downs happen in countries that are in acute military confrontations of one sort or another.

And that's the point, really: all these shoot-downs are fundamentally a political phenomenon, not a technical malfunction or mere human error. We live in a far more peaceful world than our distant ancestors did, but our deepest cultural traditions are still tribal. Once a confrontation gets going, we quickly turn into Yanomamo villagers.

You can't imagine an ?accidental' shoot-down of a civilian aircraft over Canada nowadays, for example. Back in the Cold War Days, however, there were surface-to-air missile systems in Canada, designed to shoot down Soviet bombers but perfectly capable of making the same sort of mistake that killed a plane-load of Canadians over Tehran last week. Nobody is invulnerable, and nobody is immune to the paranoia.

On the other hand, don't despair. The great majority of the world's people now live in countries where the risk of war is very low or entirely absent, and the cities are not surrounded by anti-aircraft missiles. We have already travelled a very long way from the time when every human society lived in constant fear of all its neighbours.

This is still a work in progress. The past century has seen the most destructive wars in history? which was inevitable, given the growth in technology, wealth and population. But it was also the first time that people ceased to see war as natural, honourable, and

potentially profitable, and latterly warfare has gone into a steep decline.

There could still be back-sliding, especially if the climate crisis overwhelms us, but so far the trend line is promising. The world's population has more than doubled in the past half-century, but the number of people killed in war is less than a tenth of what it was in the previous half-century.

However, the planes are much bigger, and there are now around a million people in the air at any given moment, so there are also more people being killed in shoot-downs. It's never any consolation to tell people that things are getting better on average when they have been devastated by a personal loss. But for what it's worth, they are.