

The Independent has received this report on progress with the repairs to Wideawake runway, Ascension Island. The Project Management Team for the runway repairs were asked to comment but no reply has been received in time for publication.

“Not on my Watch” says Captain Swartz



Captain George Swartz and crew in the Standard

On the latest flight from Ascension we had a brief visit from Captain George Swartz and a few members of his crew. They were on their way home for a break after work on Ascension but Captain Swartz it is unlikely to return.

Captain Swartz is a Dutch Master Navigator with 45 years' experience until recently working for the Dutch company Neptune Marine which has been sub-contracted by the US main contractor Fluor to operate tugs and other vessels around Ascension for the refurbishment of the Wideawake airstrip, mainly to tow barges of material from ship to shore.

Captain Swartz had very strong views on how the work on Ascension is progressing and the methods used to speed up the delayed refurbishment work. He was seriously worried over the safety of the work crew, including the Saint involved in the project.

It is common knowledge that the project was delayed due to environmental concerns related to the import of large amounts of aggregate, originating in Newfoundland, to be used as foundation of the improved runway, which could contain invasive plants and animals unwanted on Ascension Island.

According to Captain Swartz the original plans included ten ship loads of material to be offloaded in Georgetown between November 2020 and November 2021 but in mid-September 2021, after 10 months only two of the ten shiploads had actually been offloaded.

This has led to panic actions from the main contractor who is taking shortcuts to speed up the offloading process in order to minimise the delay and potential financial losses for the company. As it looks now, said Captain Swartz, the runway refurbishment will be at least two years delayed.

As a consequence of the looming prospect of delay and financial losses the company is taking unacceptable risks, he continued. The concerns for the safety of the personnel is non-existent. Due to overloaded barges and lack of precautions the crew is in constant danger of accidents. Tow-wires are snapping which can cause fatal accidents. A snapping

wire can cut off a limb when it recoils he said or even cut in man in half.

On Ascension there are hardly any medical facilities – “the hospital is this big”, Captain Swartz uttered, using his fingers and hands to describe the size of a sugar lump. Any medical evacuation will take at least two days, which is not good enough when somebody has cut off a limb.

I have been 45 years at sea and I have never experienced any working conditions like this and I cannot continue to work with ‘these cowboys and amateurs’ he stated. I have worked with two Saint crane operators, ‘they can confirm what I am saying’.

Some of the Filipino workers were refused permission to go for their scheduled leave but Captain Swartz took some of them with him on his departure. I couldn't leave these good guys in conditions like that, he said.

“I do not accept my crew to work under those dangerous conditions – **Not on My Watch**”

More on on Wideawake from the US Air Force

The most recent public announcement available on the Wideawake runway project was published by the US Company which won the contract, stating they had won the contract. Merco Press reported:

The runway at Georgetown Wideawake Airport on Ascension Island will be repaired by 2022 allowing AirTanker-operated A 330-200 flights to return, Fluor, the company which won the contract, said in a statement. The US\$ 170 million-dollar deal to upgrade the 3,054 x 46-meter asphalt runway 13/31 was awarded to the engineering and construction firm by the United States Air Force Installation Contracting Agency. The work is scheduled to be completed in 28 months, following a February 2020 start. The task order was awarded under the Air Force Contract Augmentation Program IV (AFCAP IV), a position Fluor has held since 2015.

One month ago the US Air Force announced a further \$11.3 million contract to replace the six non-functional wind turbine generators with a single 900 kW wind turbine generator, a battery energy storage system and upgraded control systems. A US Air Force spokesman said, “Ascension Island is currently 100% dependent on diesel generation for electrical power with all fuel shipped to the island.” The wind power is expected to reduce diesel fuel demand by 15%- 20% and should be operational by early 2023

