Air Safety

An unofficial preliminary report is that the maintenance defect with the elevator controls that caused an Air Molokai commuter plane to crash Aug. 28 may trace back to a rebuilding of the plane on the Mainland.

The National Transportation Safety Board's investigation is pursuing that indication.

While this is small comfort to those injured in the crash (none fatally), it is a small comfort to those concerned with general aviation standards locally.

The years 1973 and 1974 were black years in Hawaii for general aviation, a category that covers light planes weighing less than 12,500 pounds.

There were 39 general aviation fatalities in Hawaii in those two years with air taxis that fly passengers among the Islands contributing 16 of those deaths. That is a shocking record when laid alongside the 37-year fatality-free record of Hawaii's scheduled airlines.

The Federal Aviation Agency moved into the situation in 1974 with aviation safety clinics, an accident prevention counselor program, a ground assist program, a flight instructor refresher clinic, controller briefing teams and special surveillance of all air taxi and helicopter operations.

The results have been dramatic — no air taxi fatalities since 1974, and a reduction to eight over 20 months of 1975 and 1976 in the fatalities among private fliers and other light planes.

The Air Molokai accident could have been much more serious. It is likely that it was fatality-free only because of the skill of the pilot in responding quickly to the emergency. He used his engines to bring the plane out of its wild gyrations and hit the ground with the plane near a normal attitude.

But the accident is a reminder that safety is a day-in, day-out business that needs the unflagging attention of pilots, mechanics, flight controllers and many others.

Air taxi travel has risen strongly in Hawaii since the bad 1973-74 days. Only continued alertness will preserve customer confidence.