



## **Disaster Response: Plan now or Pay Later**

Do's and don'ts for difficulty duty.

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As difficult as it may be, flight department managers have to prepare for the unthinkable. Be sure you have a step-by-step plan for dealing with an accident - from confirming that one of your aircraft is down, to notifying the families, to communicating with the media.

Business aviation is arguably the safest travel mode ever devised. Even so, accidents do happen. Are your flight department and your company prepared? Probably not as well as you'd like.

Aviation professionals prefer to believe an accident can happen only to "the other guy." But if something does happen, the greatest good you can do, and the worst mistakes you can make, usually occur during the first few hours follow the event. This is when there is no time to react and be innovative. Positive post-accident results require planning.

Because accidents are extremely emotional events, I will limit my examples here to personal experiences and fictional scenarios.

### **ANATOMY OF AN ACCIDENT**

Gary was flying as captain of a mid-size helicopter. I was on my first flight as his copilot. We had picked up two passengers and were climbing across the densely forested hillsides en route to home. It was a gorgeous, cloudless day.

I was looking out the window at some of the most beautiful scenery I had seen since my childhood in Hawaii when a loud noise and sudden lurch jarred me out of my daydreams. The instruments showed all the cues of a drive-shaft failure: the engine RPM was winding off the top of the gauge while rotor RPM was bleeding down. Gary recognized the symptoms and immediately entered autorotation as he rolled off the power to the disintegrating engine.

I looked down and around for a potential open landing spot, but all I saw was virgin forest. We were going to land in tall trees. My first thoughts were, "This cannot be happening to me. I just got married. I'm just getting started with my life. This is not fair!"

I glanced at Gary, who was totally focused on flying the aircraft. I shut down what was left of the engine and secured the other systems in preparation for an unscheduled off-airport arrival on rough terrain (indelicatey called a crash). I shouted back to our passenger instructions to cinch their seat belts as tight as they could. They did not need to be told twice. I reached between Gary and me and flipped the levers that locked our seat and shoulder harnesses.



The canopy of trees were a few hundred feet below us and seemed to be coming up at a dramatic rate. I was frantic to do something - anything - to stop this.....to help Gary, but realized I could not. With that realization came the calm of acceptance. I knew I had better pay attention to what was about to happen, because I will die only once.

Gary made a textbook approach to the tree-tops. He brought the aircraft to a near standstill before the rotor inertia decayed and we settled into the uppermost branches. The aircraft lurched violently as the blades struck large limbs. Our 200-foot descent to the forest floor accelerated at a free-fall pace and the aircraft rolled to the right (copilot's Side down). A blur of green went by in front of me from right to left. The impact stunned me senseless.

I opened my eyes. I was on my right side in my seat. The windshield was gone. Dust settled in a ray of sunlight against the emerald green of vegetation. I took personal inventory - I felt no pain but I could not move. There was an eerie silence.

Then the silence was invaded by the sound of movement behind me and spilling liquid-fuel! I wanted out - now. I was struggling to get up when there was a crushing pressure on my left shoulder. Gary was stepping on me to get out the top/left side of the aircraft. I realized I was trapped by the seat belts I had locked only moments before. I flipped the lever and was free.

Gary stood on the high side of the aircraft while I handed each of our stunned passenger up to him. As soon as we were all out we dashed away from the aircraft and turned to watch it expectantly. It did a very un-Hollywood thing: It did nothing. No explosion. No fire.

We were lucky. The worst injury among us was a dislocated shoulder. I was not even scratched. But my experiences were typical of those of many other aircraft accident victims, according to Diane Domit, a crisis intervention specialist with Atlanta-based Crisis Management International. Traumatic-event victims incur denial, anger, and/or acceptance during the initial phases of the event, she explains. The body's reactions to a traumatic event cause heightened sensory awareness: Colors are more vivid, sounds/silence are more intense, time distortion occurs (it often seems to slow down), and the adrenaline rush may initially enable the person to perform extraordinary feats of strength. In the hours after the event, however, the victim often experiences extreme fatigue and depression as the adrenaline wears off.

It is important for you, as a manager and a leader, to know what victims experience during an accident. The doubts and concerns caused by the unknown should not compound the problems to be overcome during the immediate aftermath of an accident.



## THE NOTIFICATION PROCESS

Imagine you are the twenty-something mother of four children ages scattered from eight to two. It is 7:30 a.m., 20 minutes before two of the kids have to go out the door for school. The other two are seated at the kitchen table feeding the floor. The doorbell rings. You open the door to find you minister and your best friend. Their faces tell you the worst has happened. Your partner in life, the father of your children, is dead.

They usher you back inside and the minister sits you down. Your friend takes over the kids. The minister explains that the airplane bringing your husband home from a trip to Japan had a stop in Hawaii. During the approach, for unknown reasons, it crashed into a steep mountainside. There were no survivors. Yes, it was that flight. Yes, they have double-checked the manifest and your husband's name is clearly there.

Your world has collapsed. Your immediate family is 400 miles away. But a steady flow of friends and neighbors comes in to share your loss and reassure you of their support during the difficult days ahead. Somehow sandwiches show up at about lunch time. You do not want to eat. You sit, staring at the plate on your lap when the front door swings open and your husband walks in. You don't know whether to kill him or kiss him. As you hug him you decide to let him live.

The trip manifest was wrong. He switched flights at the last minute to accommodate a late meeting.

This scenario actually happened - to my parents. The flow of this event is a good example of what can go right and wrong after an accident.

The manifest was a key culprit in causing undue stress in my family's life. Manifest management is a sticky issue for many companies and their passengers because of concerns for privacy. But today's technology makes it easy to communicate trip manifests accurately and discreetly. Flight crews can call a voice-mail box, prior to aircraft movement, with changes or confirmation of their planned passenger load. Why prior to taxi? Because anything can happen from then on.

The next concern is how a flight department would know its aircraft has been involved in an accident. Neither the FAA nor the NTSB is obligated to contact you with early notification. In fact, they have no obligation to notify you at all. The obligation is yours. Therefore, you, as a flight department manager, must have a proactive process for knowing your aircraft is all right, or not all right.

One way to know the status of your trips is low-tech and high-touch. Many flight departments require flight crews to call home base shortly after arrival. If the call does not come in on time, the scheduler calls the destination FBO to confirm the aircraft has arrived and asks that the crew call. If they have not arrived or been heard from by the FBO, the scheduler calls the departure FBO to confirm their departure time. The next step is to call air traffic control to determine the status of the flight. If there is a problem, you will discover it proactively.



If your aircraft is in an accident, you want to notify and support the victims and their next-of-kin as soon as possible. You are in a race with the news media, which are not necessarily obligated to be either humane or supportive.

Do your flights ever take place late at night or on weekends? How would you learn of an accident? How would someone (police, fire/rescue unit, hospital, FBO, etc.) reach you during those hours? Would the caller be caught in voicemail purgatory, or would he or she reach a live person who could filter and respond to calls appropriately?

Make certain that corporate and flight department phone lines are staffed whenever you have aircraft in motion. One way to be sure you get the call is to have corporate security answer the main company phone line during off hours. Another approach is to have the main corporate and flight department phone lines roll over to a commercial answering service.

Some commercial flight services offer trip tracking that is updated periodically. In the near future an enterprising company will probably offer a real-time tracking and alert service.

### **ACTIVATING THE PLAN**

Assume you have received word an accident has happened. What is the first thing you do? Confirm it. An accident can be misreported, usually through innocent error.

After confirming the event, you must get the company's and the flight department's accident response resources rolling to help the victims and their families; you alert the disaster management and on-site teams. The disaster management team may include a senior flight department manager, a senior corporate administrative or strategic manager (but not top management), someone from communications and human resources, and a senior administrative assistant. Other needed disciplines will be called upon (legal, risk management, government relations, etc.) but may not need to be part of the core team.

This team acts as the clearinghouse for information and direction during the near-term Response process. The on-site team serves as their eyes and ears at the accident scene. The on-site team should include at least two people - a senior pilot and a senior maintenance technician. If the media are expected to need attention, it is imperative to have someone from corporate communications at the scene. Other valuable people on-site may be security, government relations, and risk management representatives.

The on-site team should not travel to the scene in company aircraft. The flight department has just had a traumatic event, and the flight crews, maintenance technicians, and dispatchers have friends and colleagues who have been involved. Although they will want to help, do not let them perform duties critical to safety. They are distracted. Use charter aircraft, have a mutual assistance agreement with another local flight department, or use the airlines. Your own people are in no condition to conduct a trip, no matter what they say.



## **TAKING CARE OF THE PEOPLE**

Once you know your aircraft has been involved in an accident, and have confirmed the manifest, you must inform and support the next-of-kin. The two key roles are the notifier and the family liaison or caregiver.

Determine who will play which roles in the next-of-kin notification and support processes. Should your flight department be responsible for notifying and coordinating the support of its members' next-of-kin? Absolutely. Should your flight department notify and provide support for the next-of-kin of the passengers? Probably not.

Death notification is an emotionally and technically difficult responsibility. If done improperly, it can increase a family's trauma.

On a cool rainy evening my Atlanta home phone rang. My boss, Dale, was calling from his home in Kansas. Ken, my friend and counterpart in the far west, had been killed in an aircraft accident that afternoon. Ken's parents lived in Atlanta. Did I have their number so Dale could fulfill his unpleasant task of telling them the horrible news?

Ken and I had finished college together. His family had welcomed my family warmly to Atlanta. Ken's dad had heart trouble. I couldn't let Dale, a stranger, tell them by phone their cherished only son was dead. Dale agreed to let me do it.

I jumped into my car and raced to Ken's childhood home. I had no idea what to say or do. The results were terrible. Although my intentions were caring and well meant, my actions and words, in many ways, made things worse.

Significant emotional, legal and practical issues come into play when notifying the next-of-kin of an injury or death. Notification should be accomplished by a team of two people. What would a lone notifier do when faced with a mother and children? What if the next-of-kin becomes hysterical, ill, or belligerent? Who would act as your witness if you end up in court.

You might choose to use outside professionals (clergy, police/state troopers, Red Cross, physician) to act as the lead notifier and have a company or department representative accompany the professional. The company person could assume the valuable role of family liaison during the recovery period of the next few weeks and months.

The family liaison is the primary contact for the family. This person acts as the facilitator for the family (and the company) in seeing to the needs of the family. A victim's family with no other relatives or close friends in the area is apt to need substantial administrative and emotional support from the liaison. A large family may be nearly self-sufficient. The liaison would adjust his or her involvement accordingly. In either case, it is not unusual for the liaison and the family to develop a deep relationship during this critical time of stress.



Money is part of taking care of the survivors. Review insurance and financial options in the event of an aircraft accident. What short-term cash advances will the company make to the family? Is there a no-fault or hold-harmless insurance option that can be offered as a rapid source for a crew member's death-benefit settlement? Will the company arrange and pay for travel by family members to a survivor's hospital bedside? Who will pay for the victims travel home for burial? Will the company pay for someone to accompany the deceased back home?

Other people will require attention. Co-workers are often deeply impacted by an accident. This may include the mechanic who turned the last wrench on the aircraft or the scheduler who talked with the crew just before takeoff. From leaders to "line boys," no one is immune. The ones who are most at risk from long-term emotional fallout are those who try to tough it out on their own.

The notifiers and family liaisons are themselves quite vulnerable. These people are directly exposed to the trauma of the families and must get professional support to handle their own well-being. Although the role of liaison is tremendously beneficial to the family, it can also be terribly difficult for the volunteer.

### **ACCIDENTS AND GOVERNMENT AGENCIES**

The NTSB and FAA will investigate all accidents. The EPA and OSHA may also investigate, and possibly take action. An aircraft accident concerns the EPA because of fuel, oil, hydraulic fluid, and battery spills. OSHA is involved because the cockpit is your crew's workplace. Do you know your rights and responsibilities when dealing with each of these agencies? For instance, the EPA has more stringent accident notification requirements ("immediately") than do the FAA and the NTSB.

What are your crew's legal rights when talking to the NTSB and the FAA? The highly recommended and accepted practice is for flight crews not to talk with accident investigators without the presence and advice of legal counsel. It is typical for crew members to accept and voice personal responsibility for an accident, no matter what the causes. After all, they were in charge. But an inappropriate "confession" could haunt them and you.

### **INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATIONS**

There is one standing rule concerning initial information about an aircraft accident: it is invariably wrong. The chaos surrounding an accident breeds bad "facts." Consider the news reports immediately after the USAir 737 accident near Pittsburgh last year. National television audiences were told the flight had just taken off when it crashed. In fact, it was an arriving flight. The families and friends of departing passengers were unnecessarily traumatized by bad information that afternoon.

Families, friends, and professional colleagues have a natural desire to know what happened and may pressure you for information. But early information will be incomplete and probably wrong. Your best policy is to stick to only the known facts, as sketchy as they may be.



The guiding rule about communications with the media and the public is leave it to the communications professionals.

#### **WHAT NEXT?**

Disaster response needs to be planned and prepared in advance. Flight departments need a trained cadre of volunteers for their disaster response teams. The chaos in the hours after an accident will not allow a flight department manager to think and react clearly. The flight department's disaster response plan should dovetail with the company's plan though the flight department does need a special section or addendum that covers the unique challenges of a business aviation accident.

What if your company does not have a disaster response plan? Many service businesses do not. Most manufacturing companies do. If yours does not, the flight department could take the lead in developing such a plan. Recent national and world events have proven that every company of any size is vulnerable and needs to be prepared for the worst.

Your disaster response plan will probably never be activated for an aircraft accident. But at least you can sleep better knowing you are ready.

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