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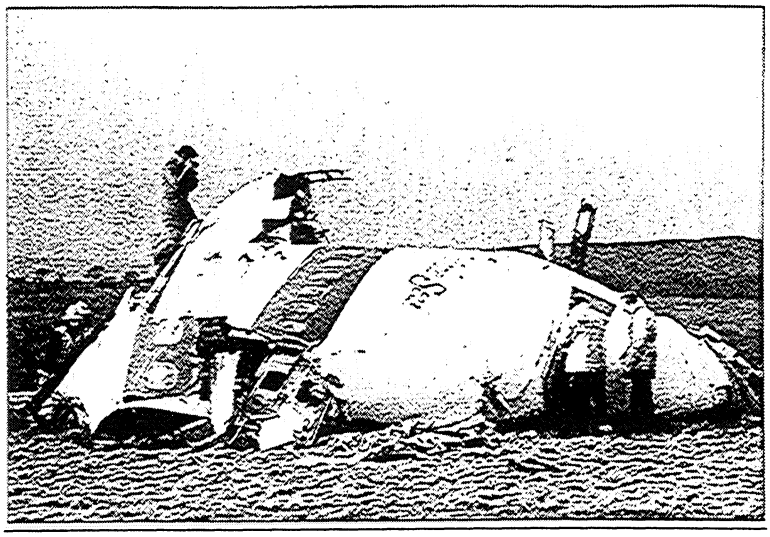
MANAGING THE CRISIS

Handling a postaccident crisis requires planning, preparation and training—and an understanding of human needs



Pan Am Flight 103, blown out of the sky over Lockerbie, Scotland by a terrorist's bomb, highlighted the need for increased training and preparation for postaccident crisis management.

DOUGLAS W. NELMS

When Pan Am Flight 103 was blown out of the sky by a terrorist's bomb over Lockerbie, Scotland on Dec. 21, 1988, the reactive management of the crisis by the airline and the U.S. State Department was fraught with incompetence and ineptitude.

As direct results of that crash, Pan Am finally went over the edge and State has allocated literally millions of dollars to improve its Consular Service's capabilities.

Although airline employees at the scene performed admirably through individual initiative in the days following the crash, Pan Am executives and State officials made decisions that clearly showed a lack of understanding or planning for such a contingency.

Their handling of the crash serves as a classic case study of how an airline's management, along with government bureaucracy can totally mismanage the crisis of a fatal accident.

- Pan Am released a telephone number to television stations for family members to call for news of relatives on Flight 103. It was a wrong number.
- One family was informed of the death of their daughter by a message left on their answering machine, which said only: "This is Pan Am calling to advise you. ..." that the plane had crashed with no survivors.
- Some calling families were put on hold, only to find themselves listening to a recording of "I'll be home for Christmas."
- A family awaiting the return of their only child's body was called by Pan Am and told that their "shipment" had arrived at the local airport. They were met at a building marked "livestock" by a fork-lift operator.
- The State Department returned passports of the victims to the relatives in a clear plastic bag, open to the photograph with the word "Canceled" stamped across it.
- Several days after the crash, high-level Pan Am executives went to Lockerbie and tried to take control away from the Pan Am manager in charge, in what was viewed by the victims' families as a "territorial power play," although the executives had no clear picture of what had been done to that point and despite the manager's having already developed a close working relationship with the families. Only at the insistence of the families did they back off.
- Pan Am advised the news media that all of the families had been notified that transportation was being made available to get them to Scotland. In fact, many families had not even been contacted.
- For at least one family, the first correspondence from Pan Am came three months after the crash, offering a $100,000 settlement and advising them to take it, because it was $25,000 over the limit set by international law.
- A memo written by the head of PR immediately after the crash and discovered after Pan Am folded, stated that a press release should be issued to "negate the statements and opinions" of the families of the crash victims.
- A flight attendant who normally worked the London-New York route was so shaken that she asked to be excused from her next flight. She was advised to fly or be fired.

The list continues, despite the feeling that Pan Am officials should have been expert at postaccident crisis management. They weren't.

So why couldn't they get their act together? In fact, Pan Am had practiced a mock crash at Heathrow just two months earlier. It did no good.

Of course, Pan Am was not the only airline to mismanage a postaccident crisis. Virtually every airline postaccident handling has some tales of things gone wrong, from the incidental to the tragic.

"The common thread through each horror story quite often is the fact that ordinary people are overwhelmed trying to do a job they are neither trained nor prepared to do. The failure is not in the individual but in a system that does not prepare for worst-case scenarios and leaves the human element of a crisis to ad hoc handling," says Jeanne Ashley, an

aviation consultant in critical-incident preparedness management.

Frank McGuire, editor and publisher of *Aviation Disaster Management* newsletter and chairman of a recent conference on postaccident crisis management, says the direct answer as to why things go wrong most likely lies in the fact that airline managers are trained to manage an airline, dealing with airplanes and passengers, not the aftermath of a major crash and all that it entails. The managers simply do not have the training to deal with victims and families of victims after a crash, he said.

The cause of this falls basically into two areas. The first is simply denial. "Some airlines do not prepare for a disaster because of the human tendency toward denial, minimizing, negating, resistance to change, cost, false security, or several of these. None of these is an advisable course," said Agnes Huff, formerly communications specialist and emergency planner for USAir, now setting up a disaster-management program for Singapore Airlines in North America.

The second area deals with false assumptions, McGuire said. The first false assumption is that the emergency plan the carrier has in effect will cover all contingencies. This assumption, combined with denial, gives a false sense of security, that the carrier can deal with it when it happens.

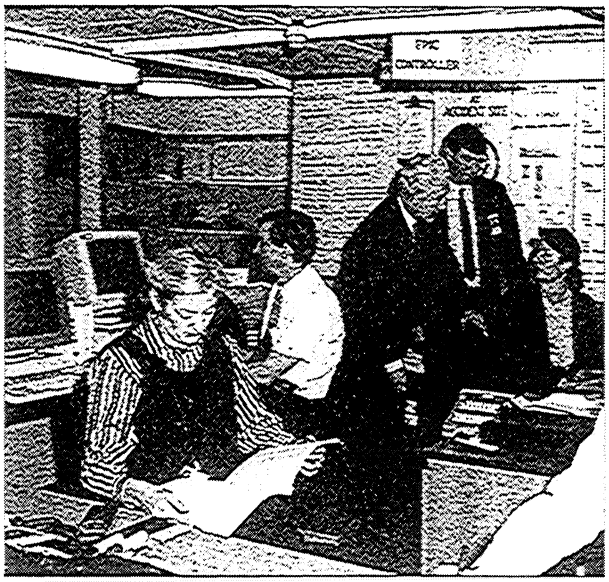
Airlines and airports as well assume that certain events will occur automatically in the event of a crash —that the airport will provide crash/rescue efforts, that local police will provide security, that the local community can provide hospital beds and lodging. These assumptions are written into the accident contingency plans.

"There can be, in fact, great conflict of interest among the organizations involved," McGuire said. "The airlines and airports need to coordinate, so that when they do have to work together, each will know what the other's plans are."

A case in point was the January, 1990 crash of an Avianca 707 on its approach into New York JFK.

As soon as the aircraft disappeared from the radar, the airport's emergency plan was put into effect, assuming that the aircraft had gone down close to the airport. In fact, it had crashed 17 mi. away.

According to Al Graser, manager of security and landside services at JFK, the emergency infrastructure within that area was overwhelmed, compounded by the need for interpreters for the Spanish-speaking survivors. A problem of sheer numbers was posed by persons—in some cases four or five—waiting at the airport to meet one person. Added to that was the unfamiliarity of the matronymics of Spanish surnames. Getting relatives to the site to meet survivors took from 12-20 hr. As a result of the incident analysis, the airport emergency plan has been expanded to encompass approach corridors outside New York's city boundaries.



British Airways' Emergency Procedures Information Center serves as the communications nerve center for its postaccident -management operations. It is manned on a 24-hr. basis during the operations by an EPIC controller, a log keeper and representatives from the airline's management, the police and other involved parties.

Most major carriers have crisis-management programs, one of the more sophisticated of which has been developed by British Airways.

Noted for its superior systems management, BA has developed its Crisis Management Centre to prepare for crises ranging from an aircraft accident to incidents resulting from the conflict in the Persian Gulf.

Within this center is the Operations Control Intelligence Centre (OCIC), which acts as the command and control center for any area of the world in which BA operates, coordinating all crisis-management operations. This, in turn, is supported by BA's Emergency Procedures Information Center (EPIC), which can be activated in under 30 min.

EPIC is manned jointly by BA and the Metropolitan Police, Heathrow Division, with up to 400 volunteers trained in a multiple of disciplines and languages. It contains 39 incoming telephone lines with a dedicated number, plus 20 outgoing lines.

"EPIC acts as a focal point between the carrier concerned, the public and the Incident Authorities," BA said. "This is achieved by being a public response center that collects information from inquirers, the incident authority and the airline. EPIC collates this information and disseminates it to those people and agencies who require it, which includes next of kin, the incident authority and the airline involved." Incident authorities include hospitals, mortuaries, fire/rescue units, etc.

The airline noted that after the Lockerbie crash, EPIC handled some 10,000 calls, most within 72 hr.

EPIC also provides support for those involved in the accident by assisting with travel arrangements, ticketing, funding, repatriation, etc.

The information center will be activated in response to a major incident involving a BA aircraft anywhere in the world. It also is contracted to more than 50 major U.K. and overseas-based carriers, and will activate following a major incident involving one of their aircraft operating to, from or within the U.K. Also for a major incident involving a contracted carrier with U.K. nationals aboard.

While a management crisis operational plan such as BA's is important, Ashley said the U.S. really needs a nationwide crisis-management center that could be accessed instantly by any airline in the event of an accident.

Ashley, who specializes in establishing such programs, noted that precedents already exist for such a center, including the national poison-control center in Atlanta, which anyone can call for immediate assistance of a antipoison expert, and the Justice Department's Victims' Assistance Program, which provides money for the states to give victims of violent crime.

While there are government programs such as the Federal Emergency Management Agency, recent disasters such as Hurricane Andrew have shown that these agencies do not have the rapid reaction capability necessary for an aviation disaster.

"The money for a national aviation

crisis center could be taken out of the Aviation Trust Fund," Ashley said. This money would be used for a wide range of items, including setting up the center, establishing the necessary communications network with an "800" number, a network of specialists who would be on call and a fund to help pay for short-term needs such as transportation, lodging, burials and initial intervention treatment to prevent long-term psychiatric disorders. It also could provide funds for short-term hospital bills, lost jobs and loss of a breadwinner pending settlement of lawsuits.

While the airlines may be willing to hire consultants to come in after a crash, the problem is that consultants may not have the experience to handle conditions that could lead to long-problems such as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), Ashley said.

A national crisis center could provide "real pros" who actually would serve two functions. One, a rapid reaction "go team," similar to the NTSB's that responds instantly in event of a crash, she said. These teams would be not only highly trained but also experienced in managing a postaccident crisis. The second would be to go around the country advising communities on how to handle a crisis and set up immediate response capability, she said.

A major effort of these specialists would be to teach communities and airlines to deal with problems such as PTSD, not only for survivors but for people such as the rescue worker who has pulled a dead child from the wreckage or the ticket agent who has had to go through the wreckage and baggage looking for identification of victims. How they are handled during the rescue and immediately after will have a major impact on how it will affect them in the days, months and years to follow, Ashley said.

Although U.S. airlines and airports are mandated by FAA to conduct accident drills, most plans neglect the human and emotional element of a disaster, she said.

In most disaster plans, "only passing mention, if any, is made about crowd control, media access, the walking wounded, death notification, volunteer rescuers and counselors and priests, phone-bank personnel or private areas for the families. Few even address emotional trauma and even fewer spell out how to handle it. Almost no one practices," Ashley said.

For most accidents, "untrained airline, airport or government employees are the primary resource for survivors, grieving relatives and the press," Ashley said. "These people never chose a career handling the most difficult of human emotions. Not only do they make mistakes with the very people they're trying to help but [they] can become traumatized themselves. Their lives can be changed forever, with flashbacks, nightmares, extreme irritability or depression, for some leading to divorce, job loss, even suicide. They are a new group of victims created unnecessarily."

Huff said that "it is essential to consider the human element in all aspects of the disaster." Leaving the people involved untreated "can result in serious emotional and psychological aftershocks."

Ashley noted that "the military expects casualties and prepares responses and rituals for them. Perhaps it is time for civilian aviation to acknowledge that casualties are going to happen and that they must be handled with respect and dignity."

Other areas that require planning by airlines are litigation and identification. Lawyers should be involved in every aspect of crisis management, including the preaccident planning, said McGuire. An airline can be assured that once an accident oc-

curs, each person will have attorneys looking out after his or her specific interests.

Survivors are not necessarily rational during the trauma. How they perceive their individual crisis as being handled by the airline will have great impact on lawsuits. This will impact on the extent to which survivors or families of victims seek revenge for what they see as an injustice.

"Punishment is part of the litigation process," said Nick Gilman, a partner in the Washington law firm of Gilman & Pangia. "The way people are treated after an accident goes a long way toward determining whether they sue. Sometimes, it is all I can do to talk a client out of sticking to a case long after it should have been settled."

A second consideration in legal action is the need for the airline to protect itself from adverse publicity brought on by its own insurance company, whose attorneys run the defense in most cases, Gilman noted.

The classic example was the incident of a Delta Air Lines crash in which the insurance company's lawyers became so heavyhanded against the victims that the "60 Minutes" television show was attracted. Even though the lawyers were working for the insurance company, the TV announcer kept referring to "Delta's lawyers," greatly embarrassing the airline.

Identification involves more than determining a name. It can include the logistics of returning victims to their families. Many countries require identification by at least two methods before the body can leave. Others will not allow a body to be removed until all bodies are identified.

And airlines cannot assume that standard forms of identification will be acceptable. According to Dr. Jay Levinson, Israel National Police Disaster Victim Officer, passports or wallets found on or near bodies could have been stolen, clothes with names sewn inside could have been bought secondhand and names on a manifest could be false.

He said that in more than one case, authorities have gone to the home of a couple killed in a crash, only to find the wife very much alive. Victims in one crash included five "married" couples who turned out to be men with women other than their wives.

An unfortunate fact is that many airlines develop programs, when what they need is a postaccident crisis-management plan that will cover all contingencies, such as:

- At one accident, the fire trucks could cover only one side of the aircraft because the field was too muddy on the other side.
- At an accident in a remote area of the airport, emergency vehicles were blocked from the crash because police were not available to unlock a gate on the only road.
- At another site, emergency vehicles got in, then could not get out since the single road was blocked by incoming traffic.
- In one accident, the wrong body was buried by the relatives because a "4" on the hand-written ID tag was read as a "9."
- After a crash, reservationists were instructed to transfer family calls to an emergency number. An agent who called reached air freight.

Managing a postaccident crisis means more than just pulling bodies out of the wreckage, feeding information to the press and clearing up. It is a protracted series of events in which each step must be planned.

"You're only going to have one chance to handle a disaster right. If you screw it up, you will remember it for the rest of your life," said Nick Ricciuti, U.S. State Dept.

Insurance and litigation will be covered in depth at the next Aviation Management Conference to be held near Washington, D.C., in September. For information, contact Frank McGuire at (301) 688-7915.