



Disaster Preparation for Corporate Operators

The obligation of planning to cope with the unthinkable is not limited to those who fly large aircraft; operators of smaller equipment can benefit from a realistic exercise that leaves them better prepared to handle the aftermath of an accident.

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by

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Although it is normal to think that disasters only happen to someone else, we tend to spend much of our time learning how to prevent accidents. Because of this focus on prevention, things seldom go wrong. But when they do, we must be prepared. Acknowledging that disasters can happen is an important first step in learning how to respond effectively.

An effort to gain an understanding of, and become more prepared for, an aviation accident involved a disaster preparedness exercise conducted at Detroit Metropolitan Airport. The exercise involved the simulated midair collision between a Ford Motor Company corporate aircraft and an air carrier operated by a local travel club, the Nomads. As a captain in Ford's Air Transportation Department, I coordinated the department's participation and monitored the effectiveness of our response.

Participating in the exercise gave us the opportunity to assess both the quality of our disaster procedures and our performance in following these procedures. Planning began eight months in advance of the exercise. The following is a recap of the planning, the exercise and our evaluation of the results.

The disaster preparedness exercise was initiated by Wayne County, Mich., U.S., Emergency Management Division. The county has certain minimum requirements related to disaster preparedness that it must accomplish. To inject

more realism into the division's training, it invited numerous community organizations (hospitals, police agencies, schools, fire departments and airport tenants) to participate. The overall impetus for the exercise came from a need for all participants to have firsthand knowledge of how their disaster plans (response, communications, notification, etc.) operate in emergency conditions.

In a normal exercise of this type, a "no notice" approach would be taken. We at Ford decided, however, from the standpoint of our air transportation department that we could learn more and produce more useful, "updatable" documents if we preplanned many of our reactions for this exercise. As would happen in real-life situations, we found exercise requirements differed considerably from the plan.

The county's emergency division provided a scenario that established the chronology of events with specific time assignments and minimum personnel requirements. It was decided that I would move from location to location in order to observe the communications and the interface between our personnel and the other agencies. In particular, I wanted to note those things that would require immediate response in initiating our emergency procedures.

The exercise originated from two mock accident sites, which resulted from a simulated midair collision between a large commercial jet and a medium-sized corporate

aircraft on final approach to Detroit Metropolitan Airport. The commercial aircraft's simulated impact area was on the airport proper and that of the corporate aircraft was several miles south of the airport. We did not observe the on-scene activities at the airport site, concentrating instead on the site of the corporate aircraft's impact area.

During our planning discussions, we identified numerous areas that needed to be addressed. In particular, we had to establish where company personnel would be required, how many people would be needed at the various locations and what other available resources we should consider dispatching. Personnel from the other company components were included when deciding on the personnel requirements.

Based on the county's scenario for the exercise, we determined that there were six areas to which Ford personnel should be deployed:

- Air Transportation Office Command Post (on the airport grounds)
- Impact site
- Air Transportation Office entry gate
- Wayne County Emergency Management Division Family Center
- Wayne County Emergency Operations Center
- Ford corporate headquarters

Our planning for each of these sites and descriptions of our experience at each site during the exercise follows.

Planning for Disaster

Air Transportation Office Command Post — The Air Transportation Office is responsible for operating and maintaining the company's domestic fleet of aircraft. The first task was to find a room within our hangar to accommodate an emergency command center. Resolution of several questions would be among our early priorities. Whom among the various department members would the director summon to the command center? What type of communications equipment should be available or installed in the command post? What staffing would be required after personnel had been dispersed to other locations? How would the exercise affect our normal operations?

Impact Site — In real life, the planning for impact site staffing hinges on where the accident or incident occurs and its accessibility. It also requires immediate coordination between company components to answer ques-

tions of control. Whom among the various company personnel dispatched to the site will be in charge on behalf of Ford Motor Co.? How and when will contact with the U.S. Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) and U.S. National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) be established? What type of communication devices will be necessary and available? How will each authorized company person be provided with credentials? How will any press conferences and news releases be handled?

Air Transportation Entry Gate — What restrictions will be imposed on entry? Should we have available at the gate, transportation to various locations or directions on how to reach hospitals and other locations connected with the incident?

Wayne County Emergency Management Division Family Center — The county established a family center at a local hotel to provide the families of disaster victims with information, refuge from the media and spiritual and psychological counseling. It was a general clearinghouse for reliable information. Should Ford set up its own family center? If the county center is utilized, how should Ford interface in terms of personnel and counseling resources? What approach should be taken to provide these services if the accident happens away from home?

Wayne County Emergency Operating Center (county sheriff's office) — The emergency operating center, through the county sheriff's office, has control over any accident at airports operated by the county. It has around-the-clock, self-contained capabilities. We were not able to do very much preplanning here because the information flow pattern was established. Our major function was monitoring and passing information to our command post for evaluation and action.

Corporate Headquarters — Whom among upper-level management should we consult on questions of company policy? Do we have approval to participate in this exercise? Are we authorized to commit company personnel to the exercise?

The Exercise Unfolds

Air Transportation Command Post — We discovered early in our operations that errors would occur. We had planned a "Red Phone" accident notification from air traffic control to begin our participation in the exercise. As "Murphy" would have it, we never received the notification and began to participate only when on-site observers called asking to confirm the number of injured. This put us more than 20 minutes behind the exercise chronology. The preplanning allowed us to quickly regain lost time. This confirmed the need to have an established guide to facilitate a quick start if a disaster ever becomes a reality.

Upon confirmation of the simulated accident, all department heads were summoned for a briefing and planning session in the Air Transportation Office Command Post. This meeting took approximately 15 minutes. The group determined the resource needs and began to dispatch personnel to the various sites. The appropriate intra-company contacts were made and our participation began in earnest.

Personnel from Various Departments — Public Affairs, Executive Security, Medical Staff and the Air Transportation Office — were assigned to the command post. We quickly determined that much more room than we had anticipated would be required in order to allow all elements to function properly. One person was assigned full-time duty to maintain a log of events and communications. This proved to be an invaluable aid during and after the exercise. Questions of all kinds were easily answered by referring to this log.

Shortly after the command post gained control of the situation, the chief of maintenance assembled all other employees on site and briefed them on the nature of the exercise accident. They were encouraged to simulate calling their respective families to confirm their own well-being and ask the family not to discuss or speculate with others about what had happened.

A locator board was created to show what resources or personnel were at each location and how to contact them. Throughout the exercise, we emphasized the importance of prefacing and ending our conversations with the statement, "This is an exercise." In spite of our efforts, one call was received from a Ford manager to verify a report of the crash from an employee who had heard only part of a conversation on his police radio.

Impact Site — At the conclusion of the initial command post briefing, a flight deck crew member and a representative from our maintenance department were sent to the simulated impact site to offer assistance in technical matters and to observe the treatment of the aircraft and its integrity for future investigative results. A problem with control and coordination was apparent at the site because various company personnel were functioning in the area without having a defined or chosen leader.

The realism of the simulated accident was apparent as we watched the makeup team prepare victims for the exercise. The victims used in the exercise were volunteers from a local high school.

We did not observe any representative from the FAA or the NTSB. We consider their presence at this type of exercise a must.

Air Transportation Entry Gate — The exercise included

several surprise developments carried out by designated role players. One of these was an attempt by a woman to enter the Air Transportation Office complex under the guise of knowing a company employee. She also had obtained an employee's identification credentials and attempted to use this information to gain entry. The attempt was thwarted because an employee familiar with department personnel, in addition to the company security guard, was on duty at the gate. Shrewd reporters and others have developed various techniques to gain access to areas where news stories could be available. Enough confusion develops due to the nature of such events that information must be protected until confirmed and the appropriate agencies and families are notified.



Emergency personnel treat "victims" of simulated midair collision between corporate and air carrier aircraft.

Wayne County Emergency Management Division Family Center — We utilized a member of our administrative staff as our representative at the family center. The counseling available for family members of victims was superb. The capability of receiving, analyzing and dispensing accurate, timely information appears to be quite valuable. However, it appeared that we might be better served in some instances to set up a company family center to assist our employees' families during such a traumatic experience. Company personnel are able to explain medical and insurance benefits and reassure the family that company resources are available to assist them.

We also found that it is desirable to have company personnel at the hospitals, to which victims are taken, to counsel victims and assist those who are released before family members arrive, as well as to identify victims and report their location and condition to the family center. Utilization of the county facilities and resources is important, but we felt that provisions must be made to accommodate families when the event is not extensive enough to activate

the county's resource.

Wayne County's Emergency Operations Center — This is the county sheriff's area of operation. Our administrative manager was our functional delegate in the operations center. Information from many sources was provided to the operations center. This information was processed and was available through a visual display for all representatives to see and utilize. We were able to ascertain the status of company personnel and to which location they had been dispatched. However, the structure of the bureaucracy created a number of hindrances that we found unnecessary.

Corporate Headquarters — During the planning stage, it was learned that the company has a crisis management committee consisting of key members of top management. The support and the active participation in the exercise by this committee demonstrated a serious commitment to preparedness and provided invaluable guidance to the operation. Not only were these personnel active participants in the exercise, but through that committee the company allowed us to commit approximately 80 people to the operation on exercise day.

This exercise was a unique and valuable learning experience for Ford. We gained a realistic evaluation of our emergency accident procedures. We discovered the need for a more comprehensive manual for the initial response to an event. This new manual will allow the emergency response process to be initiated by persons not familiar with the emergency accident procedures.

We also were able to incorporate air transportation office procedures with those of several related departments within Ford. These departments included Public Affairs, Medical Staff, Executive Security and the Ford Crisis Management Team.

We developed an outline that will allow easy access to directions for starting the response process and includes the capability to update as time and procedures change.

Outline of Plan of Action

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| | Accident/Incident Procedures Manual |
| Chapter I | Introduction |
| Chapter II | Definitions (Accident; Incident, etc.) |
| Chapter III | Accident Immediate Procedures |
| Chapter IV | Incident Immediate Procedures |
| Chapter V | On Scene Procedures |
| Chapter VI | Flight Department Personnel Procedures |
| Chapter VII | Notifications List/Priority |
| Chapter VIII | NTSB/FAA Requirements |
| Chapter IX | Appendix (Forms, Reports) |

The Next Step is Yours

Planning an exercise of this magnitude is an enormous task and much more than one agency can manage. By contacting your local airport authorities you can find out when they have exercises and the likelihood of your company participating. There usually are certain minimum requirements that must be met, but your participation is usually welcome.

One of the central considerations is to have an open mind and to not be reluctant to admit that your existing plan might need to be revised. The primary result of your participation will be the early elimination of disorder and a defined assignment of responsibility should an accident or incident occur within the scope of your operation. ♦

About the Author

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