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Law Enforcement's Response to Small Aircraft Accidents

By MATTHEW L. LEASE and TOD W. BURKE, Ph.D.



Headlines such as “Four Found in Plane Wreckage in Arkansas”¹ and “Small Plane Crashes in New Mexico”² often appear in newspapers nationwide and represent just a few of the thousands of small aircraft accidents that face law enforcement today.³ In 1998, the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) received 2,120 reports of commuter and private aircraft accidents within

the United States, resulting in 641 fatalities.⁴ Based on an analysis of these 1998 reports, one aircraft accident happened every 4 hours and one aircraft fatality occurred every 13.6 hours.⁵

Much of the public's attention is devoted to such major aircraft accidents as ValuJet's Flight 592, which crashed into the Florida Everglades on May 11, 1996, killing 110 passengers and crew. Two months after

that crash, the country faced another catastrophe—TWA Flight 800, where 212 passengers and 17 crew members died. Fortunately, mass commercial aircraft disasters remain rare, due possibly in part to safety recommendations imposed by the NTSB and the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) and to the experience and training of commercial aircraft pilots and maintenance staff, as well. Commuter

airlines—those whose aircrafts have 30 or fewer passenger seats—historically have higher accident rates than commercial airlines.⁶ Because of this, law enforcement agencies more frequently respond to regional, commuter, or private aircraft accidents. Due to the rapid growth of air travel, law enforcement administrators should analyze local and national trends of aircraft accidents, establish response procedures, and develop training initiatives for their departments. These actions will enable law enforcement personnel to investigate aircraft accidents more efficiently and professionally.

TRENDS

Law enforcement agencies should remain aware of national aircraft accident trends because local trends often mimic them. By understanding aircraft accident trends, police departments can better determine response and training

needs. Police administrators can focus on two distinct categories of data—regional and seasonal.

Regional

The NTSB compiles statistics on airplane crashes in each of America's 50 states and divides the country into five regions—northeastern, southeastern, midwestern, southwestern, and western. The western region accounted for a significant proportion of aircraft accidents, with Alaska and California making up 53 percent of aircraft accidents in this region in 1998. Also in that year, Texas accounted for 53 percent in the southwest region, Michigan lead the midwest region with 14 percent of total accidents, Florida lead the southeast region with 35 percent of the total accidents, and New York had 23 percent of the total accidents in the northeastern region. Experts attribute various reasons to each of these high rates, such as hazardous

weather conditions, lack of roadways for emergency landings, increased air traffic, and the number of airports in a particular region.

Seasonal

Police departments also should focus on seasonal trends to prepare for such contingencies as weather and amount of daylight, which may impair a response to a small aircraft accident. For example, two men died in a small aircraft accident caused by a severe cold weather storm in San Benito County, California. The California Highway Patrol could not reach the crash site for a week due to high winds and icy weather conditions.⁷

The high accident rates of spring and summer seasons, March 20 through September 22, may reflect the increased air travel during this period. In 1998, 29.2 percent of aircraft accidents occurred in the spring of the year, 34.1 percent in the summer, 20.5 percent in the fall, and 16.2 during the winter season.⁸

RESPONSE

A small aircraft accident can produce a large number of victims and a variety of problems. Therefore, police administrators should integrate response procedures into their departments' crash management programs that provide aid to victims, protect the crash site, and afford mental health services for people involved. Small law enforcement departments, that lack the resources may form multiagency agreements with neighboring departments to facilitate an emergency response to a small aircraft accident. By forming



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mutual-aid agreements, departments can share the cost of training and equipment and also establish strong relationships that may improve other police operations.⁹

The Crash Site

Law enforcement should treat an aircraft crash site similar to a crime scene in order to protect the integrity of the area for NTSB accident investigators. After the search for possible victims, officers should cordon off the area by at least 50 to 65 feet from any aircraft debris and ensure that unauthorized or unnecessary personnel do not enter the site. In order to prevent destruction of possible evidence, law enforcement officers should not move or tamper with the aircraft debris. Further, the department should designate an officer or representative as a liaison or public affairs officer. This individual should have access to information that the press or public may inquire about and, if needed, should establish a command post to disseminate information to other officers, members of the press, and families of the victims. Finally, administrators should remember that although small aircraft accidents typically do not require a sustained police presence, they should plan for officers to remain on the scene for a period of 24 to 72 hours, or enough time for NTSB investigators to conduct an initial investigation and remove the aircraft.

The Victims

Rendering medical assistance should remain the primary duty of any officer responding to an aircraft

Summary of Recommendations

Identify Local Aircraft Accident Trends

- Examine NTSB and department aircraft accident reports
- Focus on where, when, and how accidents occur

Establish Response Procedures/Contingency Plans

- Form multiagency agreements
- Prepare for a sustainment period at the crash site
- Incorporate aircraft accident response into a crash management program

Conduct Training

- Train officers to prioritize/stabilize life threatening injuries
- Understand that realistic training can reduce critical incidence stress
- Invite media to cover training to create public awareness

accident. Of the 378 aircraft accidents that occurred in the United States in 1998, 169 involved multiple fatalities.¹⁰ The number of victims usually outnumbers available police and rescue personnel.¹¹ Because aircraft accident victims often sustain critical injuries, such as leg, upper torso, and head trauma,¹² officers should receive training on how to stabilize life-threatening injuries and prioritize medical treatment based on urgency. First responders should conduct a thorough search for other victims in the area.

The Families and Officers

The NTSB coordinates services to victims' families, particularly regarding the initial notification of the accident, as well as other

services, such as the recovery and identification of victims, disposition of unidentifiable remains, and return of personal belongings.¹³ Police department chaplains can provide death notification, comfort families, and counsel officers.¹⁴ Departments with limited resources also can request assistance from the American Red Cross, which provides care for accident victims and families during times of crisis. Agency representatives should conduct critical incident stress debriefings immediately following an aircraft accident and coordinate with community health service providers to offer mental health counseling for families suffering from depression and emotional trauma. These debriefings provide an atmosphere for open communication and

ensure that officers do not develop long-term problems that may lead to posttraumatic stress disorder. Conducting realistic training in response to small aircraft accidents can reduce psychological and emotional trauma on responding officers.

TRAINING

Training on the basics of responding to an aircraft accident, searching the crash site, and providing preincident stress education should start at the police academy with a 1- or 2-hour block of instruction and continue after an officer joins a department. Seasonal training remains important to take advantage of different weather conditions that may hinder a response to an aircraft accident.

Agencies can use various training methods to prepare for an aircraft accident. For example, once a month, the Fort Campbell, Kentucky military police respond to a simulated in-flight emergency at the

base's airport. When a dispatcher relays the call over the radio for an in-flight emergency, two patrol units and a supervisor go to the aircraft's location. A third unit obtains an aircraft accident kit from police headquarters, before responding to the crash site. Police administrators seeking to develop aircraft accident training should contact airport representatives in their jurisdictions for assistance.

Additionally, departments should consider inviting the media and the public to participate in aircraft accident training. For example, when New York City police, fire department, and emergency medical personnel conduct their annual simulated aircraft disaster at JFK Airport, the media provide coverage of the training, and members of the public, such as the Boy Scouts, role-play as victims.¹⁵ Such training initiatives can promote public awareness, and departments can benefit from the public's increased sense of security and confidence,

knowing that the police can handle an aircraft disaster and other emergencies effectively and professionally.

CONCLUSION

Within the next decade, the number of annual U.S. aircraft passengers may rise to one billion. Federal government agencies have initiated steps to cope with the "inevitable prospect" of additional aircraft accidents.¹⁶ Local and state law enforcement agencies must initiate steps to prepare for the rising rate of air travel provided by commercial airlines and the increase of the number of commuter aircraft flights.

Because responding to even small aircraft accidents can quickly evolve into large operations involving many resources and jurisdictions and an unlimited number of contingencies, law enforcement administrators must plan ahead for such disasters. By analyzing trends and developing response procedures and training initiatives based on those results, administrators will help prepare their departments to better handle aircraft accidents. ♦

Aircraft Accident Kit

A typical aircraft accident kit may consist of the following items:

- medical supplies to stabilize life threatening injuries;
- extra fire extinguishers, capable of extinguishing jet fuel;
- marking tape, which can be used to identify debris and establish a perimeter;
- batteries and high power lighting equipment, used for searches; and
- contact numbers of local airport representatives who can provide possible identification of the aircraft and victims.

Endnotes

¹ Associated Press, *The Washington Post*, January 18, 1999, A1.

² Associated Press, *The Washington Post*, January 21, 1999, A1.

³ For purposes of this article, the term "small aircraft" incorporates both airplane and helicopter designs weighing under 41,000 pounds that fall under the National Transportation Safety Board's (NTSB) investigative authority.

⁴ NTSB, 1998 Aviation Accidents; available from <http://www.nts.gov/aviation/9801.htm>; accessed June 18, 1999.

⁵ According to the Federal Aviation Administration's *Statistical Handbook of Aviation*, Chapter 9, 9.1: "An aircraft accident

is an occurrence associated with the operation of an aircraft which takes place between the time any person boards the aircraft with the intention of flight until such time as all such persons have disembarked, and in which any person suffers a fatal injury or serious injury as a result of being in or upon the aircraft or by direct contact with the aircraft or anything attached to the aircraft, or in which the aircraft receives substantial damage"; and "A fatal injury is any injury which results in death within 30 days of the accident."

⁶ NTSB, "We Are All Safer," July 1998, 18.

⁷ P. Warren, "Bodies of 2 Plane Crash Victims Recovered," *Los Angeles Times*, February 22, 1999, A1, 2.

⁸ Data compiled from NTSB aircraft accident reports.

⁹ A. Garber, "Mutual-Aid Agreements Facilitate Emergency Response for Smaller Agencies," *The Police Chief*, March 22, 1997, 33.

¹⁰ Supra note 4.

¹¹ B. Hersche and O. Wenker, "First Aid Station FAS," *The Internet Journal of Disaster Medicine*; available from <http://www.ispub.com/journals/IJDM/Vol11N1/fas.htm>; accessed June 18, 1999.

¹² S. Cullen, "Prevention of Injury in Vehicular Accidents," *Pathology of Violent Injury*, NCJ-55688, 1978.

¹³ Supra note 6, 3.

¹⁴ T. Burke and J. Reynolds, "The Changing Role of Police Chaplains," *The Police Chief*, January 1995, 45-47.

¹⁵ J. Kaplan, "Crash Course," *New York*, August 22, 1994, 32.

¹⁶ Associated Press, "FAA Unveils New Aviation Safety Agenda"; available from http://www.nando.net/newsroom/ntn/politics/041498/politics3_16906_noframes.html; accessed June 18, 1999.

Aircraft accident information can be obtained through:

*National Transportation Safety Board
Public Inquiry Section, RE-51
490 L'Enfant Plaza East S.W.
Washington, D.C. 20594
202-314-6551
Internet site: <http://www.NTSB.GOV>*

Crime Data

Serious Crime Decreased in 1999

According to preliminary Uniform Crime Reporting figures released by the FBI, U.S. law enforcement agencies reported a 10 percent decrease in serious crime during the first 6 months of 1999 compared to the figures reported for the same time period of the previous year.

Serious crime includes both violent and property crimes. From January through June 1999, agencies reported an 8 percent decline in violent crime and a 10 percent drop in property crime. Within the violent crimes, murder registered the greatest decline with a 13 percent drop, followed by robbery with a 10 percent decrease; forcible rape, 8 percent; and aggravated assault, 7 percent. All property crimes also declined for the first 6 months of 1999. Burglary fell 14

percent; motor vehicle theft, 12 percent; and larceny-theft, 8 percent.

Throughout the nation, serious crime dropped. In the West, serious crime decreased 12 percent; in the Midwest, 11 percent; in the Northeast, 10 percent; and in the South, 7 percent.

Serious crime fell in cities of all population groups during the first half of 1999 compared to the first half of 1998. Declines ranged from 11 percent in cities with populations of 25,000 to 99,999 to 6 percent in cities with populations over 1 million. Rural and suburban county law enforcement agencies recorded 11 and 10 percent decreases, respectively.

For the complete preliminary semiannual *Uniform Crime Report*, access the FBI's Internet site at <http://www.fbi.gov>.