

Operation Eagle: DVI Aspects of a Disaster Exercise at Ben Gurion Airport

by Dr Jay Levinson, Supt.
Disaster Victim Identification Officer
Israel National Police

and
Elie Shmeltzer, C/Supt.
Head, Field Assistance Section
Israel National Police

The true purpose of an exercise should be to test a system and find the weak points which need further treatment. Many airport exercises, however, are basically a theatrical rerun of well practiced routines:

- * Putting out an aircraft fire (with known fuel in known quantity and an extinguishing agent with a tested formula)
- * Securing the crash site (usually an airport runway which is already a "closed" zone)
- * Evacuation of the wounded (by ambulance services which preform this function on a daily basis)

Although there are factors such as inter-agency co-ordination, communications, and sheer quantity which do need review and practice, the basic acts pose few problems.

In Israel it was decided that although these operations did have to be drilled, our exercise at Ben Gurion Airport would stress areas which had previously not been emphasized --- debriefing the uninjured and identifying the dead. The exercise was called Operation Eagle.

The very fact that a large scale exercise was scheduled to be held served as a productive incentive to review recent experience from foreign crashes, re-evaluate work procedures, and conduct refresher training for responders. The process took some six months. Then, two days prior to the real exercise, a table-top drill was held to test emergency procedures and interagency co-ordination lines one last time. Incidents were given to the group, and solutions were evaluated for practicality and ease of implementation.

On 9 January 1992 at 1:00 p.m. Operation Eagle began as air control reported an arriving aircraft veering off the runway after touchdown. At that moment a pre-arranged fire was set aboard a parked aircraft 100 meters from the landing area. As a large cloud of smoke rose into the sky, the sirens of speeding ambulances could be heard in the distance. Cameramen stood in their vantage points ready to photograph events for a documentary movie which would later be released by the Airport Authority and for an internal police film which would serve as one of the bases for lessons learnt. Arriving firemen fought the blaze, then an innovation in the Operation Eagle scenario was put into effect. Action moved to a second aircraft parked nearby, as though this was still the first plane. It was time to test how the passengers would be handled.

As medical triage was performed on the wounded, confirmation was received that there were fatalities, and the Disaster Victim Identification (DVI) programme was begun two kilometers down field. There, in a section of a cooled warehouse, a temporary morgue was established with a reception area, five examination tables, and a storage area for deceased victims waiting for release to funeral authorities.

Administrative tasks and body handling were assigned to a group of sixty volunteers from the Jerusalem and Bnei Brak Municipalities. These volunteers, drawn exclusively from the

observant religious community, had trained for more than a year with the police and other emergency services, hoping to provide service to their communities in the event of catastrophe. Operation Eagle was their first large-scale exercise in the field.

Police evidence technicians headed the identification teams. The technicians have extensive training in fingerprint work as well as in photography. Assistance in handling property was provided by an investigator who was attached to each DVI team.

In times of emergency Israel can invoke the 1967 Employment Service Act, under which available work personnel are assigned to critical jobs. Under this act the Israel National Police has given forensic training to a 250-man country-wide network of civilian dentists for the purpose of helping identifying the dead. Thirty of these dentists were called to Operation Eagle.

Each DVI team stood ready with work supplies stored in a large box ready for transport. Inside the boxes were everything from translated Interpol DVI forms and office supplies to one-time overalls and disposable gloves.

After the wounded had been evacuated to a pre-selected hospital by ambulance, DVI workers checked to see if there were any patients dead on arrival in the emergency room.

Passengers who escaped serious injury were evacuated to a local hotel where a reception center was established. Each "passenger" was debriefed, and his name was forwarded to the Information Center.

Additional police identification personnel were dispatched to the crash site to photograph the area, mark body locations, and supervise evacuation to the temporary mortuary.

As the first of what would later be 80 "deceased victims" (dolls) was received, a last minute briefing was being held in the temporary mortuary. A file was to be opened on each victim, and an examination was to be conducted. Twenty bodies had been given special tags. The task was to identify those bodies and forward the names to the Information Center.

During the next three hours the administration and identification teams at the temporary morgue worked without stop, except for a fifteen minute methodical break for drinks and sandwiches. All "bodies" were processed, and reports were filed with the Information Center. Then came the most important objective of Operation Eagle --- a series of meetings was held to establish lessons learnt.

There were several lessons which should be mentioned:

- * There must be co-ordination between body dispatch at the crash site and reception in the mortuary. In this way all bodies can be accounted for at all stages.

- * Health considerations dictate the use of one-time protective clothing, but identical white overalls blur the identity of those people working. Each person should display his task/name on the garment.

- * Although body storage is best at 3 to 4 degrees, most DVI personnel found that they could not work in an area refrigerated at that temperature.

- * The administrative and identification teams functioned well, however it was realized that they needed a bureaucratic hierarchy above them. A separate hierarchy was needed to deal with the many visitors who came to the exercise and needed explanation of the DVI function.

In all, Operation Eagle was a great success shared by the almost dozen agencies who worked in co-ordination together.