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Walter C. Hill

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U. S. AIR CARRIER ACCIDENT INVESTIGATION PROCEDURE

BY WALTER C. HILL†

MY SUBJECT for this panel is industry accident investigation procedures. In the belief that Eastern Airlines is more or less typical of U.S. air carriers as regards accident investigation, much of what I will have to say is based upon our policies and procedures.

I. CORPORATE PURPOSES

Air carrier accident investigation procedures derive from a number of corporate concerns and obligations which are beyond the obvious regulatory requirements per se. Company policies may vary from time to time and place to place, but we all have substantially the same purpose and interests. Some of them are:

Safety. Safety is the primary concern of all flying operations. Therefore, if an accident occurs, our principal objective is to find out why—as quickly as possible—in order to prevent repetition.

Humanitarian. Certainly first in point of time after a catastrophic accident occurs is the exercise of humane considerations deeply felt for all occupants of the airplane, others who might have been involved and relatives and friends.

Property. We have an immediate concern for the security of property. The property of others, including cargo in our care such as baggage, mail and express must be protected against pilferage, theft or further damage. Our own property must be protected from disturbance which might obscure facts relating to the accident, while at the same time we prepare to expeditiously return aircraft and facilities to normal operations as soon as released.

Public Relations. Immediately after it becomes known that an accident has happened, we have a public relations obligation that goes far beyond such things as removing corporate name from wreckage that might be viewed by the public. We have positive obligations to the public, to other air carriers, to manufacturers and to agencies of the government. We may have obligations to a military service or perhaps to a foreign government. Certainly we also have obligations to ourselves—stockholders, officers, employees and our future customers—in an information sense as well as in the regulatory and legal sense. Initial news releases must be as informed and as responsible as possible to minimize unnecessary concern and overreaction.

Legal Relationships. We must have due regard for a wide variety of legal relationships. I speak to those legal relationships which exist with respect to our employees, our vendors, our landlord, regulatory agencies, insurers, lessors and, on occasion, with foreign government agencies.

Furthermore, as is widely appreciated, we must look toward possible future legal action against ourselves. Personal injury and property damage litigation is implicit in some accidents. Possible concerns are enforcement pro-

† Eastern Airlines, Miami International Airport, Miami, Florida.

ceedings against individuals, even certificate limitations or revocation proceedings against the company.

II. ELEMENTS OF PROCEDURE

Thus, we address ourselves to investigation—whether they be of incidents and minor accidents with which the NTSB or the FAA do not concern themselves, or whether it be accidents of catastrophic proportions—with the same philosophy. The policies and procedures for all investigations embody the following considerations:

1. Immediate notification throughout the company to the extent indicated by the potential hazard of the incident or the severity of the accident;
2. Earliest action possible to insure the safety of passengers and crew—or to determine their condition and provide maximum comfort and assistance;
3. Protection of property, including our own, tempered with a view of returning it to its normal use or disposition as soon as practical;
4. Full investigation of all circumstances leading to the incident, to determine the appropriate remedial or preventive measures, and to initiate them on a timely basis to increase the safety of operations and reduce the cost of accidents;
5. To provide technical assistance and staff support as cooperatively as possible to other interested parties, especially agencies with the statutory responsibility for investigation and for public safety; and
6. To be attentive to legal obligations and to corporate interests, with due regard for our public image and financial health.

III. FUNCTIONS IN INVESTIGATION

Industry representatives or any other participating parties must appreciate their role in the investigation of a major accident. The Aviation Safety Bureau of the NTSB is in complete charge of the investigation. The Bureau is responsible for directing all phases of the investigation, for recording all facts and pertinent circumstances from which to develop the official conclusions including findings of probable cause after completion of the public hearings, and for recommending preventive measures to the FAA. We do not question this authority and responsibility.

We are equally clear on the role of the FAA in accident investigations as to responsibility to determine the license and competency status of air crew, ground crews, controllers and the like. The airworthiness status of aircraft, engines, navigation facilities, approach aids, etc., will be determined by them. The FAA, of course, is responsible for regulatory compliance in all of these areas, as well as for action to correct unsafe conditions disclosed during the investigation.

In support of the NTSB investigation, our action is to cooperate fully in the business of fact finding, to contribute the best technical assistance possible from our accident investigation team, and to provide full staff support from our operating bases and executive offices. For our own part, we, the air carrier, also must organize and act to protect our immediate and long term corporate interest. These actions run the gamut from fielding the company accident investigating team through salvage and dis-

posal of property in order to provide for our position in future litigation—to mention only a few.

IV. NOTIFICATIONS

To describe our procedures in more detail, assume a major accident with fatalities has occurred and that the wreckage site is near an airport we serve and where we operate a station. Emergency field action at the scene is not always susceptible to detailed planning, but the broad elements are:

1. Initial notification to authorities and to the company;
2. Rescue and protection of all persons, including medical aid for the injured;
3. Security of the wreckage;
4. Security of the cargo
(Security includes care not to alter the location or condition of parts of the aircraft or its contents except as necessary to aid or remove injured or deceased persons, prevent theft, prevent further damage from fire, etc. We are responsible for losses resulting from failure to provide proper protection for mail and express.); and
5. Taking complete charge at the scene until hand over to proper authorities can be effected. (This may include urgent and unusual measures such as handling released radioactive material, identification of eye witnesses, handling of the press and so on, all covered in the emergency manual).

The notification procedures already put into effect will have been continued throughout the company. Because the total number of people to be notified is large and the caller must take time on each call to relay the preliminary accident information, the initial notification is made to a key list. Many then run down a short list of their own, thus acting as a telephone committee. This action is preplanned in detail, the individuals being listed by name and contact in the emergency manual.

In the assumed example, the station manager will learn of the accident involving one of our aircraft. He first ascertains:

1. The flight number and type of equipment;
2. Location of aircraft and time of accident or of discovery;
3. Condition of passengers and crew, if known;
4. Extent of damage to aircraft, if known; and
5. Other pertinent information available.

He then immediately provides that all the available information is telephoned to our system operations center. The center notifies the appropriate NTSB Bureau of Aviation Safety Field Office and the Air Sea Rescue Service, if needed. Our Director of Industry Affairs is notified who ascertains whether the FAA Air Carrier District Office in Miami has the information. The center notifies the Director of Safety who in turn alerts the 15 member company accident investigating team.

Upon notification, the chief executive officer selects an officer of the company to assume direction of all company activities. The officer selected activates the accident investigating team which is standing by, as well as designates other personnel required to insure proper handling of the accident. He proceeds to the scene of the accident where, in cooperation with

the NTSB and FAA personnel assigned to the accident, he hires the equipment and facilities necessary for recovery and holding operations. He approves all miscellaneous expenses at the site, including transportation of personnel.

The Staff Vice President, Public Relations, activates the Public Relations Emergency Committee and assigns a "PR" representative to the accident scene. He coordinates and assumes the responsibility for all public statements concerning the accident which emanate from company officials. This is not to imply that we infringe the prerogative of the NTSB Investigator in charge to control all news releases regarding the accident investigation.

The immediate requirements of the investigation are now underway. I have not attempted to detail all the notifications and responsibilities as the list totals approximately 95 individuals and a number of offices and committees as well. Of course, not all are concerned with the actual investigation.

V. COMPANY FIELD ORGANIZATION

Preplanning and proper organization at the scene bring order out of chaos. The station manager has marshalled outside services as needed including those of airport, city, county and state police. His preplanned emergency list details hospitals, doctors, nurses, clergy of all faiths and the coroner. He knows that the FBI Disaster Team can, if nearby, assist with identification of deceased. He is prepared to call up the services and facilities of the Red Cross. He may secure prearranged mobile phone service. He consults his local emergency procedures plan for the list of available recovery equipment. Cranes, dozers, trucks and trailers, jacks, pilings, mats and shoring timbers might be required according to the type of accident and the situation. He also has prepared a list of rescue and recovery equipment available from nearby Coast Guard, Army, Navy, Marine and Air National Guard.

He has trained his station personnel in the emergency manual procedures, and they will function as a local team responsive to the emergency conditions. The station manager hands over local control as the appropriate authorities and company officials arrive on the scene, his people continuing on as support personnel for the investigation and associated company activities.

Should the station involved include an Eastern maintenance force, the maintenance manager will bring his organization into immediate action during the emergency. He will then continue with recovery and storage activity to the limit permitted by his manpower, equipment, and facilities. The maintenance manager rather than the station manager will be responsible for securing and operating heavy equipment required to service the accident scene.

The district sales manager establishes a field operations office strategically nearby to handle all intracompany information to and from the

scene of the accident. He maintains telephone communications between the accident scene and:

1. The New York executive office;
2. Hospitals and mortuaries;
3. Boarding stations; and
4. Relatives of victims when cleared by the New York Executive Office Emergency Committee.

The public relations representative, maintaining liaison with the Public Relations Emergency Committee and the field operations office, assumes responsibility for servicing all news media representatives. Whenever possible, a press room will be provided and equipped with table and telephones, hopefully desks, typewriters and other necessary equipment.

A room is provided for the company official in charge, equipped with local telephones, hot lines to the New York executive office, typewriters and supplies of all required company forms, lists and procedures manuals.

Finally, a waiting room for relatives and visitors is provided, if possible, remotely located from all accident proceedings and the routine operations of the company.

VI. ORGANIZATION OF INVESTIGATION

While operations proceed at the scene, the home office and other centers will be busy confirming and verifying passenger lists and cargo manifests. Next of kin are being contacted and provided with information and transportation. Medical information and records as well as identification of remains, mortuary arrangements, safeguarding of personal effects, examination of the uninjured and continuing them on their way are handled according to established procedure. Only when the needs of passengers, crew and others have been adequately provided for and when communications are established between corporate headquarters and the teams at the scene do we turn our attention to investigation of the accident.

The key accident investigating team members will assemble at the scene as rapidly as possible. After all of them have taken a look around, the team chairman will call a meeting to evaluate the circumstances and organize the technical and staff support that will be required. The team members participating will be the officials of various operating and staff departments best qualified by technical knowledge and investigative experience to assist the NTSB team in the investigation. Flight operations, both line and technical, will be represented. Maintenance and engineering will provide structures, power plant, systems and electronic experts. Their staff supporters will include the chemical and metallurgical laboratory as well as quality control and the maintenance records departments. Additional staff support will come from the medical and legal departments, and from performance engineering, airways procedures and ATC, flight recorders, meteorology and perhaps photographic services. The team is responsible as a group to the corporate officer designated to direct and coordinate all company activities. However, the members will be individually re-

sponsible to the NTSB investigator-in-charge for their assignments within the accident investigation itself.

Within a short time following the accident, the representative of the Bureau of Aviation Safety who has been designated the investigator-in-charge holds the initial accident investigation organization meeting. Here the principal members of the company team as well as other parties to the investigation are briefed by the investigator-in-charge on the manner in which this particular accident will be investigated. The investigator-in-charge explains the investigation procedures and makes specific personnel assignments to the various specialty groups such as structures, power plant, witnesses and records. He assigns to each group an appropriate company representative as indicated to him by the chairman of the company team. It is here that the responsibilities are defined and the working relationships created upon which much of the success of the investigation will ultimately depend. This meeting is the forerunner of other and usually daily meetings where results of the days work and the general status of the investigation are presented and discussed. It is in these meetings that facts emerge and opinions are formed and where confidence in each specialty group chairman's ability and objectivity are paramount to avoid ruinous friction between parties to the investigation. Above all else, we strive to avoid reaching and pursuing preconceived or premature conclusions. Our purpose in the investigation is to develop the facts which, taken all together, will reveal the true causes of the accident.

At some point in the investigation we may form opinions different from those of one or more of the specialty group chairmen. If so, we record our views and submit them along with the chairman's report to the investigator-in-charge. In this manner we may influence the future course of the investigation and the final report of the investigator-in-charge, by virtue of our perhaps unique operations understanding and insights. In this vein we must strive to reveal the true facts to the investigator-in-charge as well as among ourselves. We must not hesitate to modify our operations or equipment as soon as we identify the need. If doing such things may tend to put us on the spot in the public hearing or make our lawyers work harder later on, then so be it. Moreover, of course, we expect other participating parties to be guided by this same philosophy.

In time, the investigation activity will tend to decentralize. Some specialty groups will complete their work at the scene and move elsewhere as a group, or split up to cover several locations, or perhaps disband altogether. As the company team chairman's administrative control lessens, so will his grasp of the status of the investigation. To minimize this problem, he will have assigned a full time coordinator to the NTSB accident headquarters. The coordinator will keep communications open for the exchange of information between the investigator-in-charge and the company team chairman. Failure to keep up with all details can handicap our analysis and also disadvantage us considerably at the public hearings and other legal proceedings.

Our participation with the specialty groups will end upon presentation of each group's report to the investigator-in-charge, accompanied by our endorsement or exceptions. This will not happen before the on site investigation has ended, laboratory and shop analysis is completed, all witness statements have been obtained and pertinent records located and authenticated.

After some time comes the public hearing in which we participate as a party to the investigation. The phrase "company procedure" no longer pertains, except that as a matter of course we respond to the requirements and procedures of the hearing officer and we make our recommendations for conclusions to be drawn from the testimony heard. Finally, we have a never ending obligation to submit to the board any new facts or evidence of which we become aware, whether the board's final report has been issue or not. As is said, an accident investigation is never officially closed.