

When the Unthinkable Happens

Humans in the Loop

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Some of my best days and some of my worst days have been lived at the airport. Among the best are memories of meeting my husband and of our kids growing up with aviation at their fingertips. And on the hardest days, when the unexpected happens and an accident occurs, the weight that settles over the airport is almost too much to bear. What we do in aviation carries life-or-death consequences. Most flights end exactly as planned, but we must be ready for the moments when they do not.

A DAY I WILL NEVER FORGET

I will never forget my closest brush with tragedy when my family still owned our FBO in Orlando. That afternoon I left work early with my four-month-old son and was close to home when I received a call.

It was our line service manager telling me that two of our employees had gone down in a flying club airplane near my house. He said they had set it down at a golf course. I went straight to the scene.

When I arrived, I saw an airplane wrapped around a pole, emergency vehicles everywhere, a helicopter lifting off with one of our employees, and an ambulance taking the other to the hospital. We later learned they had suffered engine failure from a loss of oil pressure. By some miracle they avoided golfers, a clubhouse and restaurant, a busy street, and a nearby neighborhood. But not the pole.

I remember running across the golf course, carrying my infant, trying to explain to first responders that these men worked for my family. I was held behind the police lines watching the aftermath of this tragedy.

What do you do when tragedy like this strikes in your aviation community? You go to the airport. That evening we gathered in the lobby to wait and to pray. Our prayers were answered for one, but not for the other. One of our employees went on to live a full life, raising a family and continuing his flying career. The other's life was cut short, filled with promise that would never be realized.

THE HARDEST CALL

Even though the airplane was not ours and the employees were not on our clock, my mom, who was both our company president and their boss, quickly

realized she would have to make the call no parent ever wants to receive. With no training, she picked up the phone and made what was surely the most difficult call of her life to his parents, who were stunned and horrified to learn the fate of their beloved son, lost doing what he loved.

To say that event marked all of us is an understatement. I don't think about it often, probably on purpose. But when I do, the images are vivid: standing there, clutching my baby, pressed against the police tape, helpless. Knowing the seriousness of the situation but not the outcome.

It is a feeling many in this industry, unfortunately, share. If you have never experienced it, count your blessings. If you have, my gut tells me you embrace safety more seriously than someone who has never walked this path.

GOOD INTENTIONS ARE NOT ENOUGH

In the moment, we did what we thought was right. We went to the scene. We gathered at the airport. We sent people to the hospital. My mom made the hardest call of her life. But there was no playbook, no checklist, no preparation for who should do what or how to handle the flood of emotion, media, and logistics that come with tragedy. After all, it was not our airplane, and we did not have a flight school. We were prepared for other scenarios, but not this one. We learned that day that tragedy can reach beyond the boundaries you expect.

Emergencies arrive without notice and demand decisions and actions that cannot wait. That is the role of an Emergency Response Plan. It does not take away the pain, but it gives people direction. It keeps chaos from compounding heartbreak. And it helps ensure that even in the worst moments, we can respond with clarity, compassion, and competence.

WHY IT MATTERS TO ME

You may be thinking to yourself: she writes resumes for a living—what does she care about ERPs? The answer is simple. I am the wife of a pilot. I also know many people in this industry, and I pray that none of them ever face an emergency that forces their ERP into action. But if they do, I want to know their plan will guide them, protect their people and their families, and do the job it was designed to do in their time of need.

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THE BREAKING NEWS REALITY

We also live in a time where, as soon as an event happens, it is on social media or the news within minutes. You can almost guarantee there will be video. Gone are the days when an ERP could unfold methodically before the outside world learned what's happened. That is why ERPs are even more critical now, because an accident or incident can be public before you know the details, leaving little time to control the narrative or notify key people and critical partners.

Today, it is just as likely that a family member or coworker will first learn of a tragedy by turning on the TV or scrolling through their feed. That reality hit me hard this past February as I sat with my husband at the Air Charter Safety Foundation's annual safety symposium in Daytona Beach, Florida.

We listened to representatives from Hop-A-Jet outline the tragic details of their 2024 Naples, Florida crash, reminding me of the videos I watched on social media just moments after it happened. We also heard from Tim and Sheri Lilley, who spoke with incredible courage only six weeks after losing their son, First Officer Sam Lilley, in the midair collision in Washington, DC that claimed Sam's life and the lives of 66 others, and was almost instantly replayed on national news.

Their stories and bravery were heartbreaking reminders that behind every headline are people and families forever changed, and that how we respond in those first moments matters deeply. Both presentations prompted a serious conversation between my husband and me about what the plan in his flight department looks like in the event of tragedy. Logically, I asked, "Who would call me? Would I see it first on the news?"

A CALL TO ACTION

I implore you to ask those same questions about your own families and teams. Many flight departments have ERPs and practice them, but too many remain vulnerable, a split second away from crisis.

If your organization does not have an ERP, ask why and offer to be part of the solution. At minimum, identify your partners and maintain an updated contact list with employee families, company leadership, legal counsel, insurance representatives, a media spokesperson, and grief support resources. Clearly define roles so there is no uncertainty about who makes family notifications, who communicates internally, and who speaks externally. An ERP should never sit idle. Drills and tabletop exercises ensure that when the unthinkable happens, no one is left guessing.

If you have never attended a safety symposium like ACSF's, make the time. Organizations such as the Central Florida Business Aviation Association host annual safety standdowns, many of them free and often with virtual options. There is no excuse not to attend. Hopefully your organization will support this and take the lead. But if not, don't wait. Take the initiative to learn, prepare, and inspire your team to take ERP planning seriously.

Do not fall into the trap of thinking an emergency cannot or will not happen to you. The only thing worse than facing tragedy is facing it unprepared. Ask yourself, as I have, "how would I want to be treated if something happened to my loved one?" The answer is simple: with honesty, compassion, and care.

An ERP is not just a binder on a shelf. It is a promise to families, employees, and organizations counting on us to be ready when it matters most. Make sure yours is a living plan that delivers on that promise. ❖



Jenny Showalter is a third-generation business aviation professional and founder of Showalter Business Aviation Career Coaching (SBACC). With nearly 30 years of experience, she helps industry professionals strategically elevate their careers through individualized coaching, resume writing, interview preparation, LinkedIn optimization, and outplacement services. Learn more at www.showalter.com or email jshowalter@showalter.com.

USAIG agrees wholeheartedly with Jenny's Call To Action! The article that follows, from our colleagues at Empathia Crisis Solutions, outlines key considerations for Emergency Response Plans and offers insights to help you self-assess your organization's readiness to confront a crisis situation.

Safety Program Resources

