

@ALPA WORK

Advancing the Profession...Pilots & Staff

FedEx Express Flight 80

Bad news travels fast. On Monday morning, March 23, Capt. Derek Martin, vice-chairman of the FedEx Master Executive Council, and F/O Wes Reed, the MEC's secretary-treasurer, were in Auckland, New Zealand, attending the annual meeting of the International Federation of Air Line Pilots Associations (IFALPA), when Japanese delegates brought the news that a FedEx airplane had crashed at Tokyo's Narita International Airport—a definite hull loss, no word yet on casualties. They immediately started the cascade of telephone calls that typifies the ALPA response to an accident involving Association members. At the same time, Capt. Chris Lynch (Continental), also at the conference, called Keith Hagy, director of ALPA's Engineering and Air Safety Department, to ensure that ALPA was in the loop from the beginning.

Within the hour, the videos were on YouTube: FedEx Flight 80, an MD-11, had landed hard in high winds, bounced, hit hard again. The left wing came off; the airplane, still sliding and on fire, rolled onto its left side. The right wing broke but stayed attached to the structure, and the fuselage, now inverted and still burning, slid to a stop. High winds fanned the flames, but firefighters quickly suppressed the fire.

Soon the world would learn that both pilots died in the crash, making the accident the first fatal for FedEx Express, and for Narita.

Accident investigation on foreign soil

Halfway around the world, at FedEx's headquarters and "super-hub," in Memphis, Tenn., it was dinnertime, Sunday evening. Capt. Alex Duron, the FedEx pilot group's chief accident investigator, fielded one of Martin's calls.

"I called dispatch," Duron recalls. "They confirmed the accident, but didn't have much information yet.

"We opened up the Memphis ALPA office within the hour and started going through our accident response checklist and calling people."

Duron had participated as an ALPA representative during the NTSB investigation of FedEx's accident at Tallahassee, Fla., in 2002, but this would be his first as chief accident investigator for his pilot group. He wondered how well he'd fill the shoes of his predecessor, Capt. Mike Bender, who now is chairman of the ALPA-wide Accident Investigation Board.

Bender, who lives near Spokane, Wash., also received the bad news from Martin, plus FedEx's managing director of flight operations. One of his first calls was to the ALPA worldwide accident/incident hotline. On duty that night was Jerry Wright, manager of Safety and Security, who would field multiple calls on the accident over the next 4 hours, most from ALPA pilots offering support and assistance. He coordinated with Chris Baum, manager of Engineering and Operations, who had just gotten the word from Hagy as a result of calls from the IFALPA conference. Baum began going through the checklist steps to coordinate ALPA's response. He called the NTSB Command Center, which confirmed the accident and patched him into an NTSB conference call on which the U.S. response was being outlined. The NTSB welcomed ALPA's offer of assistance and expertise as it formed the team that would soon travel to Japan.

"The investigation would be conducted under ICAO [International Civil Aviation Organization] Annex 13," Bender explains. "Those are the rules that govern participation in an accident in a foreign country. The NTSB participated in the Japanese investigation under the provisions of Annex 13, and the Safety Board recognized the value that an ALPA-trained line pilot brings to the accident investigation and invited Alex and me to be a part of the team."

"At about 8:15 that night," Duron recalls, "the company advised me that they had a seat open for me on the Global Express corporate jet, leaving at 10 p.m. We launched from Memphis with 15 or 16 people plus a crew of three. We were supposed to refuel in Anchorage, but Mt. Redoubt had just erupted, closing Anchorage, so we had to refuel in



Fairbanks. We were on the airplane for 13–14 hours.

"We were supposed to land at Yokota Air Base, because of the Narita curfew, but enroute we learned that the Japanese authorities decided to let us land at Narita. We arrived at the accident site about 3:00 a.m. local time on Tuesday.

"We were allowed to visit the accident site for a brief time," Duron continues. "About 60 percent of the wreckage had been moved about 300 meters from the runway. I took some photos, then we went to the hotel to get some badly needed sleep."

In Japan, the police are in charge of a separate and distinct criminal investigation, and the criminal investigation takes precedence over the accident investigation.

Meanwhile, Bender was working his way from Spokane to Narita. The NTSB team arrived about 4 p.m. on Tuesday, and Bender landed at about 5:30 p.m.

"In Japan, the police are in charge of a separate and distinct criminal investigation," Bender points out, "and the criminal investiga-

tion takes precedence over the accident investigation.

The Japan Transport Safety Board (JTSB) must wait to do any of its safety investigation until cleared to do so by the police. The Japanese government assigned five investigators to the accident.

"We participated not as a separate entity like we would in a U.S. or Canadian investigation, but as part of the NTSB team. We were their technical advisors, along with representatives from Boeing, Pratt & Whitney, the FAA, and FedEx management. We also were very aware that we were there as FedEx employees. FedEx management was outstanding through all of this."

Duron participated in the aircraft working group (powerplants, structures, and survival factors) during the field investigation; Bender helped investigate operations issues.

"We spent all day Thursday and Friday at the site, and Saturday and Sunday writing up our field notes," Duron recalls. "The JTSB accepted the field notes from the NTSB, and on Monday we went home."

"The U.S. team basically suggested things [the JTSB] should look at," Bender adds. "We laid out how we would do it if we were in the United States. We offered them our photos, and the NTSB gave them copies of the technical reports—not just the blue-cover summary—on our accident at Newark [in 1997], which was similar. The NTSB also con-

vinced the Japanese investigators of the urgency of having the CVR and FDR read out.

"The Safety Board's keeping us in the loop," says Duron. "As part of the NTSB team participating in the Annex 13 investigation, we've been asked to participate in some of the subsequent investigative activities."

Lending a hand

Capt. Valerie Thal-Slocum, chair of the FedEx MEC Critical Incident Response Program (CIRP) Committee, came out of a mother-daughter class on the evening of the accident and checked her cell phone for messages. One from Pete Dillenbeck, her FedEx management CIRP counterpart, bore the sad news of the accident.

"I took my kids home and began calling my CIRP team members," Thal-Slocum recalls. "Pete Dillenbeck flew to San Antonio to be with the first officer's family; he stayed through the memorial service a week later. The ASTAR CIRP chairman, F/O Mark Christensen, drove from his home in Eugene, Ore., to the captain's home in Portland, Ore., and stayed there until F/O Deb Leppo (FedEx) arrived from Colorado to assist with the initial family interaction.

"We activated CIRP members in Anchorage, Indianapolis, Los Angeles, Memphis, Newark, and Paris to meet the crews and to conduct defusings. We used just about all of our team members."

Final flights

Two CIRP members from ANC—Capt. Jeff Kilmer, chairman of the ALPA-wide Pilot Assistance Committee, and F/O Ron Horton—were scheduled to fly to Narita to help mitigate the stress on site and to escort the pilots of Flight 80 on their final flight home. Because Mt. Redoubt Volcano's eruption closed ANC, F/O Ryan Travis was dispatched from Memphis to Narita. After a short and busy 8 hours in Narita, the pilots' remains were released by the Japanese authorities and Travis boarded the airplane to escort the pilots home.

"The entire Narita ramp staff stood at attention the whole time they were loading the caskets," says Thal-Slocum. The rammers stayed at attention until the airplane was back in the sky, bound for Oakland, Calif.

"At Oakland, about 30 FedEx employees came out to show their respects," Thal-Slocum continues. "They had two wreaths for each casket—one purple and orange, the colors of FedEx, and one red, white, and blue, to mark the pilots' return to U.S. soil."

Kilmer picks up the story: "Ron and I had finally gotten out of Anchorage and went to Oakland to relieve Ryan, but he lives in Memphis, so he elected to stay on the airplane.

"The caskets were in wooden crates. The Japanese had draped the boxes in white linen, which is part of their custom. Company personnel in Oakland provided two American flags, and we attached the flags to the caskets as well.

"We got into Memphis about midnight, in pouring rain and thunderstorms. Almost 100 pilots in full uniform, and most of our senior managers, from CEO Fred Smith on down, were standing at attention on the ramp in the pouring rain.

"We had a viewing in a hangar for about three hours," Kilmer recalls. "The company had put out two guest books to sign for the pilots' families."

Smith was the first to sign the guest books; hundreds more followed. Thal-Slocum adds, “One of our senior executives said, at the service, ‘This is the best of FedEx at the worst of times.’”

“The pilots were an Anchorage-based crew,” Kilmer explains. “I took the captain home to Portland, Ore. We got into Portland about 6 or 7 a.m.; about 40 pilots and 100 ramp personnel were waiting for us. Ron took the first officer home to San Antonio, and they were met by an equally large group of pilots and other FedEx employees. At the funerals, about 30 FedEx trucks followed each funeral procession.”

Continuing CIRP

The need for CIRP after an event as traumatic as the FedEx Flight 80 accident covers a span of people, places, and time.

“On April 9, we did a CISD [critical incident stress debriefing] with ALPA staff and MEC officers,” says Thal-Slocum. “On April 16, we did two more—one with the FedEx Go Team, and the other with the FedEx Standards and Flight Training Department.

“We also did two CMBs [crisis management briefings] at

the Memphis hub—one at midnight for the morning launch and another at 1300 for the afternoon launch. About 40 pilots came to each of those.

“We’ll have an April 30 debriefing for the Anchorage base. We tried to do that twice already, but they had to be rescheduled because of Mt. Redoubt.

“We’ve had multiple layers of stress to deal with—the economy down, our company parking airplanes, talk of furloughs,” Thal-Slocum points out. “On April 10, the company laid off 1,000 employees. None of them were pilots, but the FedEx family has taken a hit. A number of pilots have been stuck at outlying stations because of the Mt. Redoubt Volcano, adding to the stress on their families. And we’ve had the accident. But the FedEx family has really pulled together.

“I want to thank all the ALPA folks, our management, and all the kind people from other airlines who helped or offered to help. The whole airline industry closed ranks behind us, and we are very grateful for their support.”—*Jan W. Steenblik, Technical Editor*