



The Toronto experience

Joe Bates reports on how Toronto Pearson put its emergency rescue plan into action for real when an Air France flight overshot the runway 18 months ago.

It started out like any normal Tuesday but ended up as one that Toronto Pearson International Airport will never forget, for it was the day that an Air France flight crashed on landing and every one of its 309 passengers and crew survived.

Flight AF358 from Paris ended up in Etobicoke Creek ravine – a small valley at the far west end of the airport parallel to Highway 401, one of Toronto's busiest roads – after overshooting Runway 24L by about 200 metres.

Based purely on the TV news images of thick, black smoke billowing from the burning wreckage of the A340-300, few of the millions of people around the world to later watch the incident from

the comfort of their own living rooms could have imagined that nobody died and that there were only 43 relatively minor injuries.

But what in all intents and purposes had all the makings of a major catastrophe turned into an amazing story of survival, thanks to the response of the airport's emergency rescue team and the quick thinking of the 12 Air France crew, who managed to get everyone out in less than a minute as flames engulfed the aircraft.

Dozens of vehicles that included fire rescue trucks and ambulances and hundreds of airport staff, supplemented by hundreds more from different agencies responding to the incident, were on the

scene within minutes in what operator, Greater Toronto Airports Authority (GTAA), describes as a well co-ordinated, multi-agency response.

GTAA president and CEO at the time, John Kaldeway, told reporters: "We practice this month after month. You practice this against the hope that it will never happen. But we train and we practice and yesterday, the event that we wished would not happen, did."

Eighteen months on from the incident, it is perhaps time to reflect on the impressive way that Toronto Pearson's emergency rescue team dealt with the incident and find out what lessons, if any, have been learnt from it.

The first thing to consider is that major incidents like this are thankfully rare in Canada, and the rest of the world for that matter, although all airports across the planet have to have emergency rescue plans in place to prepare for the worst case scenario.

In this respect, GTAA and Toronto's other emergency rescue providers were prepared for flight AF358 in that they were ready, willing and able to provide:

- Immediate fire suppression and life safety care
- Physical, mental, and spiritual support for passengers aboard the flight
- Continued operations to ensure the airport remained safe, secure and operable for other passengers

The GTAA believes that the impact of events such as Y2K, the Eastern North American Blackout, ice storms, 9-11 and SARS has brought the world into a constant state of response that has encouraged the development of new, improved emergency management programmes that extend beyond the response of fire, ambulance, and police.

It claims that today's airports, including the GTAA, have to develop programmes that "involve a more substantial approach in defining the elements of prevention, mitigation, preparedness and recovery".

In the case of Toronto, this evolution in the world of emergency management and preparedness resulted in new safety, security, public health and emergency legislation and has led to continuous planning and training to ensure that an airport-specific response became common to everyday operations. The new philosophy fortunately coincided with the initiation of the GTAA's Airport Development Program (ADP), allowing for the implementation of a comprehensive emergency management system at Toronto Pearson.

In its first year of operation, the airport authority showed its support for this evolution in emergency management by creating a dedicated Emergency Planning division. The division mandate is to develop a comprehensive Emergency Management Program (EMP) that will maximise the airport's response, preparedness and recovery levels while minimising interferences that could detract from its operational integrity.



Today, Toronto Pearson's EMP is considered leading-edge, and the GTAA was recently invited to the 2006 International Air Transport Association (IATA) Crisis Management Conference in Poland to showcase the programme as a model to air carriers and airports around the world.

One of the more visible components of the EMP is an aggressive emergency airport exercise programme, comprised of one full scale, ten partial and six tabletop exercises annually, even though Transport Canada regulations only call for only one full scale exercise every three years.

As part of its EMP, members of the wider community's emergency response and support teams work with the GTAA to stay current on emergency protocols under various airport-specific situations. It also allows them to explore more efficient ways of managing emergency events.

Toronto's Airport Operations Control Centre (AOCC), duty managers, fire and emergency services and a plethora of operational staff that

include airside safety officers, groundside public safety inspectors and terminal operations staff are among the GTAA workers that support the EMP under the direction of the gateway's emergency planning division.

The AOCC is the heart of communications for the airport's operational staff. It operates 24/7 to provide information and dispatch support and monitor any deviation or irregularity in normal operations. These honed skills prove invaluable during a crisis, when the AOCC quickly assumes responsibility – under the direction of the airport duty manager – for tracking events and providing seamless communications between the many involved parties.

The duty manager is responsible for the overall operational integrity of the airport on a 24/7 basis. During emergency situations, they act as the airport's emergency site manager. This involves the co-ordination of all responding agencies and resources supporting the response and rescue operation.



With the evolution of the Emergency Management Program, in 1996 the GTAA made a corporate decision to develop a self-contained and fully equipped Fire and Emergency Services facility at Toronto Pearson. Initially, the service included one central fire hall offering aircraft rescue with other service requirements remaining

owned, full-service Fire and Emergency response team. In fact with two fire hall locations, 99 staff and 21 fleet vehicles, the GTAA insists that its fire fighters are capable of responding to an incident anywhere on the airport site within three minutes.

Toronto Pearson's EMP also includes a distinctive group of non-traditional

personnel. Their immediate assistance and diverse skill sets are invaluable additions to the more traditional response teams.

The Pearson Family Support Team provides short-term assistance to families of victims at the onset of an accident until the air carrier can take over. Tending to their basic needs as well as providing crisis mental health support to the family for their mental wellbeing. This includes the provision of blankets, clothing, food and beverages, telephone access and information about friends and family.

External to the GTAA, a large number of organisations provide vital support to the airport during emergencies. These include municipal fire, ambulance and police services – specifically from the Peel Region and Toronto area. The experience, knowledge and support from these agencies are critical to any crisis management at Toronto Pearson.

Through much experience, the GTAA is aware of how irregular operations can quickly spiral into emergencies, and that not all events can be foreseen or controlled. However, through the extensive web of emergency support teams and continual training, the GTAA is confident that Toronto Pearson has raised the bar to the highest level when it comes to providing a safe and efficient response to any situation.

“Although there are times when the occurrence of accidents can't be controlled, our response to them can.”

“You practice against the hope that it will never happen. But yesterday, the event that we wished would not happen, did”

dependent on municipal agencies.

By April 2005, the GTAA's Fire and Emergency Services complex was operating as a full service facility, with its staff fully trained and capable of handling hazardous materials, aircraft rescues, structural fire fighting, specialised rescue and emergency medical situations.

Toronto Pearson also holds the distinction of becoming the first airport in Canada to have its own privately

airport support services – the GTAA GO Team, Pearson Family Support Team and Pearson Crisis Support Team.

Drawing on GTAA employees who typically work regular non-operational jobs, the GO Team can be recruited quickly during irregular or emergency situations. GO Team members are trained in first response through a certification process and provide basic support to operational and emergency

notes GTAA's vice president for corporate affairs, Steve Shaw.

To some, August 2, 2005 will be remembered as the day a “miracle” took place at Toronto Pearson International Airport. To those involved in the response, however, it will be remembered as the day when their training, commitment and professionalism were put to the test and they passed with flying colours. **AW**