

Drill tests readiness of Tahoe's first responders



First responders contend with 47 injuries and a plane on fire during a drill at Lake Tahoe Airport. Photos/Kathryn Reed

By Kathryn Reed

It was controlled chaos inside and outside of the airport in South Lake Tahoe on Monday as first responders and staff were put to the test in a mass casualty incident.

A C130J airplane carrying 47 people crashed while landing – at least that was the scenario for the Aug. 25 drill.

The city has a specialized fire truck stationed at the airport just in case of an incident like this. It can pump 1,500 gallons of water, while a normal fire engine has 500 to 700 gallons. Normally an engineer with the fire department would operate this truck, though there are a handful of airport employees who are also trained to use it.

In addition to the water it has a foam substance that is used because it acts as a barrier by cutting off oxygen for the fuel. Purple K is a powder substance that the truck has for engine fires.



South Lake Tahoe Fire Chief Jeff Meston, standing, checks in at the emergency operations center.

While a complete debriefing is yet to come, the initial reactions from South Lake Tahoe Fire Chief Jeff Meston and City Manager Nancy Kerry is that it went well.

The biggest glitch was the technology breakdown in the emergency operations center. The Internet was down. Email wasn't working.

Staff was tasked with doing jobs they don't normally do. In the emergency center, which is where the City Council meets and in an actual incident would be off-limits to the media, there are predesignated groups in charge of specialized tasks.



Victims in the path of a fire hose.

Lauren Thomaselli, who works in parks and rec, is handling logistics. She has to figure out where the chaplain can meet with family members. A bus has been ordered to take able-bodied victims to the Red Cross shelter at the city's recreation center.

Lts. Brian Williams and David Stevenson are working the law enforcement side. (Normally only one of them would be at the center.) They are making sure there are refrigerated trucks for the bodies. They have contacted the FBI in case this turns out to be a terrorist attack. The National Transportation Safety Board and Federal Aviation Administration are contacted.

People are constantly being interrupted to be updated with facts – number of those injured, killed, where they had been taken, that the FAA is on site, that the media needs to be briefed.



Paramedics lift a victim onto a gurney.

At various times the heads of each sector meet separately to assess how things are going, what needs to be done and what each will be doing going forward.

Hilary Roverud, who is in charge of the city's planning department, leads these meetings.

"Hilary did a bang-up job as planning chief," Meston tells *Lake Tahoe News*.

What Meston was initially most happy about was seeing the type of air support that is available to the city.

"I feel 1,000 percent better knowing that the military is a call away. They could have transported all the injured in their units," Meston said.

Chinook and Black Hawk helicopters were part of the training. The C130J – had it not been the training module – is also designed to ferry people. Inside it is like a flying hospital, where patients can be stacked three high in the center on suspended gurneys. Flight nurses are registered nurses and the medical technicians have at least their EMT, while most are at the LVN level.

"Because we are so isolated and have one hospital, to fly people out is critical," Meston said.

Still, the weather in Tahoe is not always conducive to flying.

That is why the fleet of ambulances was lined up on the tarmac as well. And with those vehicles come the paramedics whose job it is to assess the needs of those who are injured and get the most critically wounded to a hospital ASAP.

Just outside the danger zone is South Lake Tahoe firefighter/paramedic Mike Mileski. He has one of the more difficult jobs because he is coordinating the medical response.

People are yelling for tourniquets and backboards.



Ambulances are ready to whisk patients to Barton Hospital.

California Conservation Corps members are the victims. One has a foreign object sticking out of her shin; others have blood dripping from their faces. It takes personnel time to assess all the injured.

On the far side of the aircraft firefighters are putting out the "fire", even getting some victims wet. South Lake Tahoe Capt. Mark WyGant is working along side firefighter Steve Pevenage of Lake Valley fire. It shows the cooperation that would take place in a real scenario.

While these two agencies often work together, others who were part of the drill are not always immediate partners. But they would be in situation like this or if there were another Angora Fire.

Some of the other agencies involved in the drill were, South Lake Tahoe police, Fallen Leaf Lake fire, Carson City fire, El Dorado County sheriff's, El Dorado search and rescue, CalFire, CareFlight, Air National Guard, El Dorado probation, Barton, CalStar, North Lake Tahoe fire, Tahoe Douglas fire, Meeks Bay fire and Truckee fire.