

Sign of the Times: Area Firefighters Receive Disaster Training

By Alan Gilday
Chronicle Staff Writer

With major airports in Buffalo, Toronto and Hamilton and the increased threat of terrorism, firefighters in the Niagara District decided it was time members were trained in emergency airport rescue.

With that in mind, more than 168 volunteer firefighters from Niagara Falls to Port Dover came to the Dunnville Airport over the weekend for a series of training exercises hosted by Dunnville firefighters Arnie Goodwin and Mike Smith.

Goodwin works as a firefighter at the Hamilton Airport and also serves as a captain with Haldimand County's Station No. 9.

"The guys have been doing great," said Goodwin. "Each time they've got through the exercise, their attacks and victim stabilization have been better."

The firefighters took part in classroom training Friday and hands-on exercises the following day.

Student Bill Nolan from Station No. 10 said the exercise was a great learning experience.

"It's good for us because we're so close to the airport," said Nolan, a rookie firefighter. "We'd most likely be the first station to respond."

Emergency Training

During the scenario, the firefighters received a radio call...a Jetstream 31 aircraft with 10 people and 2,000 pounds of fuel is forced to make an emergency landing at the Dunnville Airport.

The firefighter reaction to the disaster starts with the command team who decides how to handle the situation.

The attack group is called in first to extinguish the flames using a foam specially formulated for handling aircraft fuel fires which normally accompany a crash.

According to Goodwin, firefighters have just three minutes to douse the flames or separate them from the plane's fuselage. Any longer than that and the flames will sweep

through the plane and destroy everything in its path.

Once the fire has been isolated or extinguished, the victims are checked by the search and rescue squad. They then perform triage which is the systematic prioritizing of injuries.

"They spend 30 seconds checking over each of the victims to ensure their airways are clear and to determine their condition," said Goodwin.

Victims who are dead are left wherever they are found. It's also important for the firefighters not to move anything except when attempting a rescue because investigators examine every little piece of debris for evidence when investigating the cause of a crash.

Victims Often Wander

"You also have to keep an eye out for people wandering around in a state of shock," said Goodwin. "At a crash in Sioux City, they found people wandering around a corn field two miles

away from the crash site. They had jumped from the plane before the crash."

Some victims wandering around a crash site have been mistaken for bystanders by emergency services personnel.

Putting the men through the exercise three times allowed each of the groups to experience the rescue from every angle. Groups took turns assuming the attack, search and rescue and triage roles.

"We're hoping they'll take this back to their stations and teach their fellow firefighters," said Goodwin.

Air Crashes Differ

Dealing with air crashes is totally different from structure fires. First of all, unlike water, firefighters don't have an unlimited supply of foam to shoot onto a fire. Fortunately, foam can be applied from a distance and it works quickly to smother the flames. Firefighters can also use the wind to their advantage because the wind will often carry

the foam onto the fire.

Air crashes involving commercial aircraft are particularly dangerous because they usually have oxygen bottles as well as tonnes of fuel on board.

"It was the pinnacle of experiences for me because I worked at Fleet in Fort Erie putting planes together," said Port Colborne's Mike Mascitelli, a six-year member of the city's department. "With the experience we've had here today, we're more aware of what we have to do to work out the moth balls in how we handle these situations."

Haldimand County's Brian Wagter said he

enjoyed having the opportunity to network with other firefighters.

"You pick up a lot of information from other firefighters-you pick each other's brains," he said. "Having a live demonstration allows us to put everything into practice."

Wagter said he and his fellow firefighters have used many of the same techniques and resources before but it helps to be able to practice them.

"We've used the foam when we've had hay bales which have soaked through and with chemical fires," said Wagter. "It's expensive stuff-about \$100 per barrel but you can have a raging fire

and it just smothers it." After it was all over, Goodwin said he was impressed with the firefighter's performance.

Training Results

During the last run, he timed them and they were able to subdue the flames within a minute and a half which is well below the three-minutes firefighters have before the whole plane becomes fully engulfed.

"For volunteer firefighters, I was very impressed and we even threw all kinds of curve balls at them," he said. "There was a person riding on the motorcycle who got hit by the wing as the plane came down."

Many of the firefighters from Niagara District were pleased with the event because they have never had any airport fire training which surprises Goodwin because there are airports in Welland and St. Catharines and there could easily be a crash or even an emergency landing someday.

Pilots will look for any safe place to put the plane down if they can't get back to a major airport.

"I'm hoping will be able to introduce some airport training into our regular training," said the Hamilton Airport firefighter.