



Swissair disaster taught medical examiners a lesson in logistical challenges

Dorothy Grant

Swissair Flight 111 crashed into the ocean off Peggy's Cove, NS, a year ago this month, but for those who had to deal with the disaster the memories haven't faded (see also *The Left Atrium*, page 733).

Last June, during a conference that attracted medical examiners and coroners from across Canada, Linda Mosher, the administrative officer in the office of Nova Scotia's chief medical examiner (CME), described some of the complex logistical challenges that accompany disasters of this magnitude.

Within hours of the crash, she was meeting with a carpenter, electrician and plumber to plan the construction of morgue facilities in a huge hangar on an abandoned airbase at Shearwater, NS. Next, the CME's office had to locate proper medical equipment and supplies, and this meant borrowing morgue tables, gurneys, instrument trays, autoclaves, x-ray machines and operating room lights from local hospitals.

A private company was hired to deal with sanitation in the morgues, and dozens of medical, dental and other personnel had to be recruited. Eventually, more than 1000 military, RCMP and related personnel were involved in the operation.

Finding a supply of protective suits for those working in the body identification rooms at Shearwater soon became a top priority. Mosher says the demand for these garments was so great that a company had to put its staff on round-the-clock shifts to accommodate the huge orders.

A large supply of body bags from a Georgia supplier was placed on a flight for Halifax within hours of the crash, but they were not needed because the bodies of the 229 victims had been horribly shattered and only one whole body was found. Instead of the bags, thousands of disposable forceps and glass test tubes for use in DNA analysis had to be ordered to deal with the 15 000 body parts that were recovered.

Three apartment-size freezers were brought to the hangar site and huge refrigeration trucks were soon parked nearby for storing body parts. Trucks supplied by a military dental unit were also brought to the site, where they were quickly transformed into forensic laboratories.

A run on Ziploc bags

Preparations for handling the body parts meant that it was soon impossible to buy Ziploc plastic bags in some Halifax stores. Members of the local Emergency Measures



Stormy weather over Peggy's Cove

Organization office were sent to grocery and department stores to purchase plastic tubs and Ziploc bags in bulk. "They cleaned the stores shelves out," Mosher recalls.

The other logistical duties included arranging meeting rooms and office space, ordering phones and photocopiers, and assuring that sensitive phone messages delivered on cellular phones remained confidential. The CME's office also had to arrange for photo laboratories and orchestrate flight arrangements, car rentals and accommodations for medical experts arriving from across Canada to assist their colleagues in Nova Scotia.

Mosher says the roles of clergy and critical incident stress teams, who provided key emotional and spiritual support to weary — and often traumatized — disaster personnel, should not be underestimated.

For those on the front lines, disaster was often the mother of invention. For instance, when army and navy reservists who had been serving as morgue attendants and stretcher bearers had to return to their regular jobs, replacements were found in the form of students and graduates from a provincial school of embalming.

Mosher says no one who played a frontline role in this disaster will ever forget the scenes that took place in the hangar at Shearwater last September, October and November. She is convinced that a book will be written about one of the worst air tragedies in Canadian history. Only then, she says, will it be possible to give the world a definitive portrait of the challenges the horrible event presented and the enduring impact it had on so many lives.

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