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Flight 1549: From New York to Norad, Testing a Response Network

By AL BAKER

Salvatore J. Cassano was at Fire Department headquarters in Brooklyn when US Airways Flight 1549 splashed down in the Hudson. He stood at the sound of the radio transmission and headed for the department's new command center. He was thinking terrorism. Mr. Cassano, the chief of department, then did something he could not have done before 9/11: he got in touch with a member of his department who had a new seat on the joint terrorism task force.

In Northern Virginia, on the fifth floor of the Transportation Security Administration’s secure operations center, officials were reviewing plans for responding to an air emergency at Barack Obama’s presidential inauguration — a bomb in an airport terminal, a shoulder-fired rocket, a plane explosion — when word of Flight 1549 crackled over a communication line linking scores of agencies across the country. The problem was first described as a small plane downed in the Hudson River. The officials distrusted it.

“As you recall, that was what everyone said on 9/11,” said one federal official who was in Virginia at the time. “For the U.K. bombings, on July 7, 2005, the first report was an electrical fire. So we’re very accustomed to hearing, ‘Oh, no, it’s nothing.’ ”

The adrenaline in the room surged. “If there is a plane that is behaving erratically in New York City, everyone moves,” the official said.

Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg had given the State of the City address in Brooklyn, and was riding back from lunch at an Applebee’s when a deputy took a cellphone call from a police lieutenant at 3:36 p.m. that January day.

Mr. Bloomberg’s Chevrolet Suburban soon nosed into City Hall, and as the mayor walked to his work space on the second floor known as the bullpen, the deputy went to a basement “situation room,” conceived after the 2003 blackout but activated only weeks ago. The deputy turned on camera feeds and phones. Upstairs, the mayor’s first call was not to his police commissioner, but to the federal
transportation secretary, Mary E. Peters — because there was “no evidence of criminality,” Mr. Bloomberg’s deputy said.

The crash of Flight 1549 was many things: a “Miracle on the Hudson,” with no fatalities among the 155 people on board; a rare ditching in American aviation history; a celebrity-making event complete with heroic airline pilots and fast-moving ferryboat saviors.

What has been less talked about is how the events tested emergency response communications and coordination. A commercial jetliner, after all, one having taken off from La Guardia Airport, had crashed into the heart of the city in the middle of the afternoon.

The crash on Jan. 15 was a “shock to the system” that forced the emergency systems and protocols created in response to the Sept. 11 attacks, said Philip D. Zelikow, the executive director of the federal 9/11 commission.

“Any episode like this is an opportunity to sort of check the wiring and see how things are working,” said Mr. Zelikow. “What they had there, for a few minutes, was a series of emergency calls and a loud alarm ringing.”

Almost no part of what happened on 9/11 came in for as much criticism as the country’s air response.

“The airlines knew what was going on, but the Federal Aviation Administration didn’t,” Bob Kerrey, the former senator, who served on the 9/11 commission, said last week. “Then, the F.A.A. knew, and the White House didn’t. Then, nobody on the local level knew that there were planes, hijacked, on a collision course with the Eastern Seaboard.”

The final, official verdict on how well the galaxy of aviation and emergency agencies communicated and performed on Jan. 15 is months away. Interviews with roughly a dozen agencies and more than 30 people create an initial, partial portrait of what happened once Flight 1549 faltered.

There were oddities, luck and examples of teamwork. Some things seemed to work well. Certainly Flight 1549 revealed the networks of communications that have built up since 9/11. But the implications of the early judgment that the crash was a freak accident might well garner significant scrutiny.

The early sense that birds had taken out Flight 1549’s engines ran through those first notifications and colored everything. Word of the birds first came from the crew, just 90 seconds after takeoff.

The pilot’s words — “hit birds” — passed from the sky to controllers at the New York Terminal Radar Approach Control on Long Island, and were conveyed to their colleagues at the La Guardia tower, who broadcast it to the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey police in a notification that blared in...
emergency centers around the city via the Emergency Alert Notification System. A small metal box emitted an audible alert in command centers at Police Headquarters in Lower Manhattan, at the Office of Emergency Management in Brooklyn, at the Coast Guard base on Staten Island and at a Fire Department 911 dispatch center in Queens.

Departures from La Guardia were stopped to give Flight 1549 the chance it would need to land.

At the same time, F.A.A. officials in Washington were on the move. Their operations center got several notifications about Flight 1549, even before it ditched, and began communicating on the agency’s Domestic Events Network, an open telephone network forged on 9/11 that has “never been shut down since,” said Laura J. Brown, an agency spokeswoman.

On Jan. 15, the F.B.I. was connected to the line, as were other federal agencies; it can accommodate more than 100 parties, said Ms. Brown.

Unlike on Sept. 11, controllers never lost track of the plane, even though it dropped below an altitude where F.A.A. radar can detect aircraft. In fact, “the actions he took were exactly what he said he was going to do,” Ms. Brown said of the pilot, Capt. Chesley B. Sullenberger III; he said he was headed for the river and he went there.

Coast Guard Petty Officer Brian J. McClung was the local search and rescue controller on duty at the time. He heard the alert from the La Guardia tower and, moments later, fielded a call from a controller there. He said it was the first time he had “seen them call us.”

Crews on the ground had no idea where touchdown would come. John Lucia, the operational manager at the air traffic control center on Long Island, phoned the Police Department’s aviation unit and the Coast Guard. “We provided the last known location, based on aircraft information and radar,” said James Peters, an F.A.A. spokesman. “It was somewhere south of the George Washington Bridge, at 900 feet, and heading south. You could not pinpoint it any more.”

At the Transportation Security Administration center in Virginia, across from the Pentagon, officials set up a phone bridge to link the agency’s leaders with federal security directors from La Guardia, Kennedy and Newark Liberty International airports, and with federal air marshals. That line was created in 2006, and is run from an operations center near Washington Dulles International Airport, a central nervous system for 450 commercial airports in the country.

“The F.A.A. was all over it, and they were very confident of the bird-strike theory, very early,” one Transportation Security Administration official said.
Still, officials had questions. They believed one engine had been damaged, but they wondered about the second. How could birds knock out both? The Transportation Security Administration officials knew that if it had been sabotage, they would have to send word up through the Department of Homeland Security to the White House, said Christopher T. White, an agency spokesman.

“We are trying to assess if it is an isolated incident or a multiple-pronged attack,” Mr. White said, adding that terrorism was quickly ruled out.

The official recalled that “it kept coming back that ‘it does not appear to be terrorist-related.’ ”

Looking back, the official said the effort was diligent, not a product of paranoia.

“The only reason T.S.A. was created was to stop terror attacks in transportation,” the official said. “Unless you’re moving at the first instance you hear of something, it’s too late in the aviation context.”

The plane was in the Hudson when Chief Cassano of the Fire Department heard the alarm. In the seventh-floor emergency center, at 9 MetroTech Center in Brooklyn, the chief saw the crisis from several points. It was far different from standing at a makeshift command center beneath the twin towers on 9/11, staring up at buildings about to fall.

Here, images were beamed back from a camera mounted on a police helicopter. News reports streamed in. He coordinated with Assistant Chief Robert Sweeney, the operational commander, who was tracking the plane as it drifted south toward Battery Park. A police captain who is a liaison to fire officials was on hand, another assignment that came after 9/11.

Soon, reports came in from a fire marshal, Patrick Campbell, who was on the terrorism task force. He happened to have been at La Guardia with his family, about to go on vacation.

He got a list of the passengers from officials at the Port Authority. He faxed it to Chief Cassano, who gave it to workers in another room who were calling area hospitals and paramedics at the scene, checking one name at a time. Chief Cassano had the manifest faxed to the department’s field communications unit at the New York Waterway terminal where Fire Commissioner Nicholas Scoppetta and Police Commissioner Raymond W. Kelly were then huddled with the mayor, the governor and others.

Workers tried to match names on the manifest with those rescued from the jet. Before dusk, officials at a news conference said it appeared everyone on Flight 1549 had survived.

Pieces of the puzzle arrived in 911 calls.

The first, at 3:29 p.m., came from a man on Briggs Avenue and 199th Street in the Bronx. He said he
heard a loud boom in the sky, looked up and saw the plane in flames.

At 3:31 p.m., a fire dispatcher got a 911 caller’s number from a police dispatcher, phoned the man back and explained what had occurred: “We called the airport and they said a bird flew into the plane,” the dispatcher told the man, who, at that moment, was speaking with police officers in the street.

At 3:32 p.m., a Fire Department dispatcher from the Bronx called a colleague in Queens, imploring him to “call La Guardia tower.” The Queens dispatcher responded: “It’s a bird that went through the engine. We got it already.” The Bronx dispatcher said, “Just make sure it landed, because I’m getting a plane crash up here.”

At the North American Aerospace Defense Command headquarters — a 24-hour operation in the lower level of an office building at Peterson Air Force Base in Colorado Springs — the call from the Domestic Events Network arrived on a secure landline. The communication, piped over speakers in the ceilings and on desks, said: aircraft emergency in the La Guardia area. A hush fell over the 30 or so people in the room, and a “listening watch” took hold, said Capt. Bob Edwards, a Canadian Forces aircraft navigator who was the deputy air domain chief at Norad.

The words from the East Coast said it was a possible bird strike; the plane was returning to La Guardia. Then it was ditching in the river. The thought of scrambling fighter jets was raised but quickly rejected — in part because, with things moving so fast, “it’s not something you’re going to have off the ground in 30 seconds,” said Captain Edwards.

Images from cable news networks came up on plasma televisions, adding sight to the sounds at Norad.

A new, integrated radar system shared by the F.A.A. and Norad gave the officials a “common operational picture,” of the sky, said Michael D. Kucharek, a Norad spokesman. That system, not in place on 9/11, allows operators to get a plane’s flight number, tail number designation, point of departure, destination and estimated time of arrival.

But there was no need to use it on Jan. 15, officials said.

Since the protocol and communication lapses on 9/11, Norad’s focus has shifted. It watches inside United States borders, as well as outside. It is hard to estimate how many Domestic Events Network alerts come over each week or month.

“Some weeks are busier than others,” said Mr. Kucharek.