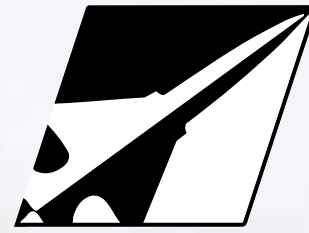




National
Defence

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WINTER 2002



Flight Comment



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Canada 

WHO

Do We Land

First?

It was early November 1988 in Iqaluit. Our mission was to provide CF-18 aircraft to test the then new North Warning System (NWS) FPS-117 radar that had replaced the old Dew Line Early Warning sites. As a part of the advance party our role was to ensure all administrative support and aircraft arrestor systems were ready to support the fighter Operations that would take place over the next three weeks. A dedicated CC-135 tanker would also support this mission.

The advance party was a mixed bag consisting of one Air Weapons Control (AWC) officer, three MWO/WO's Refrigeration and Mechanical (RM) techs, three Military Police, fire fighters and a photographer. The role of this team was to support the operations of the three CF-18's assigned to the task.

Three days after the arrival of the advance party the CF-18's arrived ready to commence the testing of the new, state of the art, NWS. As can be imagined, this created quite a bit of excitement in the town of Iqaluit. It is not every day that they have this much activity there.

On the sixth day of the operation all was going well. Two of the F-18's had been airborne for approximately three hours. Through constant contact with the Canadian NORAD region in North Bay, it was confirmed that the fighters had completed two runs and were about to come off tanker for the final set of tests against the NWS. In the middle of this seemingly smooth operation a distinctive "Mayday, Mayday" was heard on the Guard frequency. Immediately the adrenaline in the tiny Ops section started to flow. Is it one of ours? The tower was quick to answer the distress, which was eagerly monitored by us in the Ops Centre. Through monitoring the radio transmissions over the next few seconds, we were able to determine that it was not one of ours. The pilot in the distressed aircraft stated that he was a ?C-135 enroute to San Diego. When asked to repeat, the tower confirmed that they had heard EC-135. The EC-135 is an electronic countermeasures version of the tanker aircraft. The pilot went on to explain that he was declaring an in-flight emergency due to an explosive decompression. He was not able to determine the extent of his damage, but confirmed that he did have a fatality as a result.

Upon hearing the transmissions, our assistance was offered to the tower and as it was a Military Flight of an "EC-135" the tower personnel agreed that we, the CF personnel in place there, should handle the situation. Immediately our senior MWO was dispatched to the tower to act as an advisor and as the stand-in OSCER (On Scene Controller Emergency Response). When communications could be established directly with the distressed aircraft, details of crew size, intentions, and severity of damage were sought. Also, it was made clear to the pilot that there were military personnel including Fire Fighters and Security personnel on site that would respond to their arrival. The intention was to try and put the crew at ease as much as possible by assuring them that personnel somewhat familiar with their CFR (crash, fire, rescue) capability and security requirements were available to them. Several minutes went by as the aircraft dumped fuel in preparation for landing. In the meantime, coordination of medical personnel, accommodations, and winter clothing was initiated with the local authorities.



During all of this unexpected activity the CF-18's and the CC-135 had continued with their mission and were about ready to recover. They had been in contact with North Bay and were aware that there was a situation developing in Iqaluit, but not of all the details. Upon further investigation and coordination with North Bay it was discovered that the CF-18/CC-135 package would be ready to land about 15 minutes after the distressed aircraft. This created further problems due to the fact that there was a risk that the distressed aircraft could potentially crash on the runway and render it useless for the inbound package. It was decision time. Who do we land first? On further consultation with the distressed aircraft, now approaching final, it was determined that they had full control of their aircraft and did not expect further problems on landing. As a result of this, it was decided to allow the distressed aircraft to land first and then the remaining package. The risk here was increased by the fact that the weather had closed in and there was no alternate for the package.

Within minutes the distressed aircraft was on the ground and landed without further incident followed by the CF-18/CC-135 package. On observation of the aircraft, I discovered that it was a KC-135 (Stratotanker) and not an EC-135 as passed by the tower. There was no visible damage to the aircraft except a dark stain stretching from the cockpit to the tail, which turned out to be blood from a member of the crew that had been sucked out through an opening in the top of the aircraft. On the discovery of the aircraft type, the preparations for security could be relaxed in favour of assistance for the crew.

Local medical personnel now came to assistance in providing medical services to the crew of the disabled tanker and to procure the appropriate body fluid samples from the surviving crew. At the same time, the aircraft was secured to preserve it for the investigation that would follow. In the end, it was discovered that the celestial observation window on the port side of the aircraft had broken as the Boom Operator was preparing to take a sextant fix. The upper portion of the airman's body was immediately sucked out through the opening and resulted in his death.

As a then young Captain, I learned many very valuable lessons from this experience. Not the least of which, was the importance of depending on the vast amounts of expertise available from the personnel assigned to my mission. On another aspect, I had learned that it was extremely important to be able to weigh the consequences of the decisions to be made with respect to the risk of landing the emergency aircraft before the others or vice-versa. The other amazing fact was the willingness and abilities of the community to come to the aid of those in need. Within minutes enough winter clothing and supplies were provided to take care of the entire crew of the KC-135. Additionally, through trial by fire, I had learned the importance of proper handling of personnel and materials in an emergency situation, which ranged from media personnel to medical personnel for evidence gathering as well as the importance of preserving the physical evidence for the incident investigation. ♦

Captain Paul