



The Story of Eagle III

The following letter was written by Kirt Butz, chief pilot of County Rescue Service Helicopter Eagle 3, Green Bay, Wisconsin.

Dear Steve,

My story has to begin by telling you how proud I am of my company and co-workers. EAGLE III has done everything in our power to assure the safety of our crews. We have higher weather minimums than required, IFR aircraft, night vision goggles, and we train to a higher standard than required. However, despite all of our hard work and diligence, the unthinkable happened. We had a fatal accident.

Let me digress. My company offered me the chance to attend HAI HeliExpo in Dallas in February of 2006. As I was looking through which classes I wanted to take, *Coping with Crisis*



101-Managing an Aviation Disaster caught my eye. I have experienced two accidents with different companies prior to my experience here. I have seen it done wrong. I was determined to learn how to do it right knowing that I would never actually NEED it.

I came back to EAGLE III and told the management team that the course was so good that we ought to all go through it. We briefly discussed having you come here to teach the entire management team. However, in the meantime, there was work to do. I took out the CWC101 Workbook you gave us and met with our PR person, Tiffany Wiebel, and we walked through the plan step by step.

As a draft, we changed only what was necessary to fit our particular operation as you suggested, assigning names to different tasks, keeping people “in their lanes”, compiling phone numbers, and thinking about the details. After just a couple hours of work the draft was finished. Unfortunately, before we could present our final plan to the entire management team our crisis occurred. Between the time I took the course and the time our incident occurred was not much more than a month. I was at a meeting about an hour and a half away when I got the call that one of our aircraft was down. Our director of operations was in our primary aircraft almost an hour away.

I got on the phone with Tiffany about 10 minutes after learning of the accident. She stated “ It’s just like you said it would be. It’s crazy here. The press is already calling. What are we going to do?” I said, “Tiffany, we have our plan and we are going to follow it just the way we

laid it out and I'm on my way." This young woman did an impeccable job of dealing with the press and organizing what needed to be done. Our entire management team worked together as a cohesive unit. We got the news out right away with a few lines in a press release and followed up about four hours later with a live press conference. (The press was on scene within 10 to 15 minutes after the accident.) We used all of the press material contained in the CWC101 course changing only what we felt we needed to change to make it fit us. Guess what? The press did not get everything right, but most reporters did not write damaging stories. They harassed the widow. They were rude, insensitive, and obnoxious. Hey, they were the press.

Right from the start we followed our list of tasks to accomplish what you taught us in the course. FAA and NTSB-notified. Press release-out. Follow up-later. Recovery operations-initiated. News Briefing-scheduled. Press release-written. Primary spokesman-set. Emergency ops center-set. Internal briefings-twice daily at minimum. Employee assistance-setting up debriefs. Get back in the air! All of this going on while desperately trying to be there for the victims' family. Life following such a catastrophic event becomes a process to complete one task and move to the next. There is a beginning to a crisis but the aftermath becomes a marathon moving from one evolution to the next and never ends.

I felt like we were fighting for our own survival as an organization and me as an individual. We worked 12 to 14 hours per day with eight or 10 of us doing different things. We have been going nonstop for more than a week now with no slowdown in sight. We did all of this while staffing ground ambulances and taking flights. We had to stay in service.

Because of the information you presented in the course, we knew exactly what to expect from the FAA and NTSB. We cooperated and complied. Fortunately for us, we have been painfully meticulous with all records and maintenance. While they were investigators with a job to do they were also respectful of our situation. Enough said.

Most important to us was our fallen comrades' family. EAGLE III is a family and we take care of each other. However we got point-specific things to do from the course that we implemented that had we not been educated may have been overlooked. There is nothing that we wouldn't do for them, but things are moving in hyperdrive and without a guide it is easy to overlook something simple but meaningful. They lived about an hour away. We got them into town, rented them a room and a car. They decided that they wanted to return home, we got them a limo. We sat and talked with them, we grieved, cried, and comforted them as best we could. We had lost one of our own.

Any operator that does not take advantage of your Coping With Crisis 101 course is making a terrible mistake and risking all that they have worked so hard to accomplish. Given the great care that we have taken to ensure our safety, it's not fair that it happened to us. Sometimes tragic things happen to good people. God Speed.

Kirt R. Butz
Chief Pilot
EAGLE III