

AFTER ACTION REPORT

**Pastoral Care And Support
During The Search And
Recovery Operations
Alaska Air Flight 26**

**Respectfully Submitted by
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USCG Pacific Area/Eleventh District Chaplain**

BACKGROUND

On 31 January 2000, at approximately 1640 PST, Alaska Air Flight 261 traveling from Puerto Vallarta, Mexico to San Francisco, CA, crashed into the Pacific Ocean, approximately 11 miles off the coast of Point Mugu Naval Air Station. The Airplane was a MD 80 with 83 passengers and 5 crewmembers on board. The Coast Guard was called and responded with all of the assets in the area to attempt a search for any possible survivors and to retrieve debris. The National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) was responsible for the investigation

CHRONOLOGICAL SEQUENCE OF EVENTS

31 January 2000, Monday

- 1730 hrs. LT Ronald R. Ringo, Jr., CHC, USNR, D11 South Chaplain contacted by LCDR Bob Laahs, Work-Life Supervisor at ISC San Pedro who informed him that a plane had gone down in route to LAX and near Station Channel Islands.
- 1830 hrs. LCDR Laahs contacts CAPT Ron Swafford, CHC, USN, the Pacific Area Chaplain in Astoria, OR, where he is TAD, to request additional chaplain coverage. CAPT Swafford authorizes him to call Chaplain Bob Marshall the District 13 Chaplain in Seattle and Reserve Chaplain Barry Crane, to request their assistance.
- Chaplain Swafford is unable to get a flight out of Portland, OR prior to the next morning at 0830.
- 2050 hrs. Chaplain Ringo arrives at Channel Islands and meets with Station CO, LT J. J. Jones. The chaplain is briefed regarding the plan of action for searches and the schedules of the search teams.
- 2200 hrs. Chaplain Ringo checks in with CAPT George Wright at the Operational Command Center, located at the Port Hueneme Naval Base. Chaplain Ringo informs him of the Critical Incident Stress Management (CISM) response at Station Channel Islands and that CG EAPC Tiffany Collier will coordinate the CISM response with Chaplain Ringo providing pastoral care for the team and the boat crews.
- 2350 hrs. Chaplain Ringo returns to Station Channel Islands to assist in (multiple) demobilization of the boat crews performing the search and recovery. (7 crewmembers per crew)
- 2350 hrs. CG EAPC for D13, Kristen Gray arrives at Station Channel Islands. The CISM Team coordinates plan and confirms the request for addition Chaplains.

1 February 2000, Tuesday

- 0130 hrs. Chaplain Ringo accompanies relief boat crews to the boarding pier and returns with the off coming crew to Station Channel Islands.
- 0230 hrs. Chaplain Ringo assists in a demobilization of the off going crew. (5 crewmembers)

- 0430 hrs. Chaplain Ringo accompanies the next relief boat crew to pier, and checks in with the Coast Guard Operational Command Center and provides ministry of presence for the Center.
- 0530 hrs. Chaplain Ringo returns to Station Channel Islands with off going boat and conducts demobilization for the crew. (6 crewmembers)
- 0700 hrs. CISM Team meets at Station Channel Islands.
- 0800 hrs. Chaplain Ringo provides demobilization and pastoral care for the crew of a 41-foot boat whose were props tangled with blankets and debris from the fallen plane.
- 1030 hrs. Chaplain Ringo returns to the CG Operational Command Center (OPC) at Port Hueneme.
- 1100 hrs. Chaplain Ringo visits CGC LONG ISLAND, especially in regard two crewmembers that were more affected by the work they performed. (16 crewmembers.)
- 1130 hrs. Chaplain Ringo went from the LONG ISLAND to the CGC PT CARREW, due to its being taken out of the crash area to perform perimeter security, to conduct CISM demobilization (12 crewmembers.)
- 1230 hrs. Chaplain Ringo travels from the CGC PT CARREW, to the CGC PT BRIDGE to conduct a demobilization. (12 crew members)
- 1400 hrs. Chaplain Ringo returns to Station Channel Islands to provide ministry of presence, and counsel for those coming from the crash scene.
- 1800 hrs. Chaplain Swafford arrives at Station Channel Islands and receives an update brief from Chaplain Ringo. After 25 straight hours of continuous and arduous ministry, Chaplain Swafford orders Chaplain Ringo home for rest.
- 2350 hrs. D-13 and Reserve Chaplains, plus 3 peer counselors arrive.

2 February 2000, Wednesday

- 0700 hrs. The CISM Team meets to coordinate visits and units to be debriefed. Chaplains Marshall and Crane from D-13, are now on-site along with several CISM trained Peers from D-13.
- 0900 hrs. The CISM Team proceeds to Station Channel Islands.
- 0930 hrs. Chaplains Ringo, Swafford and Crane transported via Coast Guard Auxiliary boat MR. CHIPS to meet the CGC PT CHICO, CGC STEADFAST and CONIFER to provide demobilizations for approximately 145 total crew members.
- Chaplain Bob Marshall remains at Station Channel Islands and performs deckplate ministry and CISM counseling.
- 1500 hrs. Chaplains Ringo, Swafford and Crane return to Station Channel Islands.
- While underway, Chaplain Swafford is called by CAPT(sel) Manson Brown, Secretary Slater's Military Liaison, for assistance with plans for the Memorial service and USCG Chaplain coverage for the victims' families in a hotel near LAX.
- 1530 hrs--0000 hrs. Chaplain Bob Marshall and a CISM Peer member transported to CGC HAMILTON to ride it to her homeport of San Diego. They provided CISM debriefing along with deckplate ministry.

- 1600 hrs. Chaplain Swafford's presence requested by CAPT (sel) Brown at the Command Center to start preparations for memorial services.
- 1600 hrs. Chaplain Crane assigned to provide a CISM Information Brief to spouses of personnel assigned to the plane crash scene, at the ISC SAN PEDRO STATION. He departs for the station at this time. The brief was held at 1800 hrs. (Approx. 10 people).
- 1600 hrs- 1930 hrs. Chaplain Ringo and EAPC Tiffany Collier checked on crews and visited the Operational Command Center again to check on staff working the center.

3 February 2000, Thursday

- 0700 hrs. Chaplain Crane returns Seattle due to previously scheduled overseas trip.
- 0900 hrs. Chaplain Marshall and CISM Team conduct CISM debrief on the CGC BUTTONWOOD (65 crewmembers) and the CGC LONG ISLAND, (16 crewmembers).
- 0900 hrs-2200 hrs. Chaplain Swafford directed to the Los Angeles Airport Area for Chaplain presence at NTSB victims' family briefs and memorial service preparations.
- 1000 hrs-1500 hrs. Chaplain Ringo and CISM Team members conduct two CISM debriefs with CG LA AIRSTA (12 air crewmembers).
- 1200 hrs. Chaplain Swafford assists in a private beachside memorial service for the victims' families held at a beach at PT MUGU NAVAL AIR STATION. (Approx. 250+ people)
- 1500 hrs-1700 hrs, CISM Team and Chaplain Ringo conduct a debrief on board the CGC PT BRIDGE. (14 crewmembers).
- 1800 hrs. Chaplain Marshall and CISM Team conduct an informational brief to spouses of USCG units from the Sand Diego area involved with FLT 261 crash. (Approx. 12 people).

4 February 2000, Friday

- 0730 hrs. Chaplains Ringo, Swafford and Marshall meet with other CISM Team members at Hotel to determine orders for the day and receive consolidated briefing updates.
- Chaplain Swafford returns to LAX to assist victims' families, attend NTSB briefings and continue preparations for memorial services. He moves his base of operations to a hotel near LAX in conjunction with CAPT Mike Wallace, the PAC AREA SAR coordinator.
- 1000 hrs. Chaplain Terrell Eldrith D11 San Diego Reserve Chaplain assists a CISM Team in conducting two debriefs for AIRSTA SAN DIEGO. (Approx. 12 crewmembers).
- Chaplain Marshall assists CISM Team members, by providing deckplate ministry and counsel to several Cutters still in the search area.
- 0900 hrs- 1500 hrs. Chaplain Ringo and CISM Team members conduct two debriefs at STATION CHANNEL ISLANDS for two groups.
- 1700 hrs- 200 hrs. Chaplain Ringo and CISM Team members conduct a CISM debrief at STATION SANTA BARBARA, for the MSD Unit. (8 team members).

5 February 2000, Saturday

- 0730 hrs. Chaplains Ringo and Marshall meet with other CISM Team members for breakfast and informational exchange, update and closure.
- 0900 hrs. Chaplain Marshall and out of area CISM Team members return to their AORs.
- 0900 hrs. Chaplain Ringo and EAPC Tiffany Collier visit STATION CHANNEL ISLANDS to check on crewmembers and Auxiliary crewmembers.
- 1030 hrs. Chaplain Ringo and EAPC Tiffany Collier visit CG Operational Command Center to check on staff still working the operation.
- Chaplain Swafford continued work on the memorial service and participated in the service that was held at 1400 hrs in Pepperdine University's auditorium (500+ people).

6 February 2000, Sunday

- 0730 hrs. --- 1700 hrs. Chaplain Ringo and D11 CMC Spadoni, transported by AUX boat "MR CHIPS" to CGC STEADFAST and CGC CONIFER to perform religious services for personnel onboard. (11 and 15 attended). Several counseling sessions also conducted.
- 1000 hrs. Chaplain Swafford returns to the PAC AREA command in Alameda
- 1700 hrs. Chaplain Ringo visits the crew of CGC CARREW to check on their emotional condition while providing Port security.
- 1800 hrs. Chaplain Ringo visits CG Operational Command Center to check on the staff.

7 February 2000, Monday

- 0800 hrs. Chaplain Ringo assists EAPC Tiffany Collier in all hands CISM defusing at Small Boat STATION LONG BEACH. (Approx. 25 crewmembers).

9 February 2000, Wednesday

- 0900 hrs. Chaplain Ringo assists EAPC Tiffany Collier in all hands CISM defusing at AIRSTA LOS ANGELES. (Approx. 50+ crewmembers).
- 1300 hrs. Chaplain Ringo and CISM Team conduct a CISM debrief for ISC Staff assigned to support duties of Search and Recovery, at the CG Operational Center Port Hueneme. (7 crewmembers).

WORKING WITH THE AMERICAN RED CROSS VOLUNTEERS

Although the initial focus of the CG Chaplains was to provide pastoral care and counseling to the crewmembers of the units involved in the recovery, Chaplains were asked to aid in the planning of a memorial service for the victims of Alaska Air Flight 261. The plan was to conduct the service before the families began returning home. A request for the military Chaplains was made by Secretary Slater's Military Liaison, CAPT (sel) Manson Brown. The

American Red Cross SAIR team took the point on planning. Chaplain Ron Swafford was asked to represent the CG Chaplains at the meeting. Three meetings were held before the memorial service was conducted on Saturday 5 February. In addition, the families requested and received permission to conduct a private beach side service at the Point Mugu Naval Air Station, at 1300 on Thursday 3 February since that beach was the closest beach where the families' privacy could be assured. The Red Cross SAIR Team rode with the family members on the 1-hour bus ride from LAX. Chaplain Swafford met them at the beach. Chaplains from Point Mugu were also available. They were an essential part of the team support and did what ever was requested, regardless of rank or position. The Navy Chaplains from Port Hueneme, Point Mugu Naval Air Station and San Diego quickly offered their assistance. Due to the superb support of USCG chaplains from outside the AOR, Navy chaplain support was not needed to care for USCG units. This freed the Navy Chaplains to care for their personnel involved in the recovery phase of the incident.

ISSUES OF CONCERN

Unlike previous critical incidents of this magnitude, and due to the lessons learned from those incidents (especially Egypt Air 990,) this operational use of Coast Guard Chaplains went as well as one could hope in this type of emergency. Lessons learned from Egypt Air 990 were fresh in most chaplains' minds. When called upon, Chaplains from neighboring districts eagerly came to help and played a vital role in meeting the spiritual and emotional needs of our personnel involved.

This operation brought to light a very important issue for Navy Chaplains assigned to the Coast Guard. Navy Chaplains mindset is one that prepares them to respond immediately to war or hostilities in any part of the world. All Chaplains are aware that they may be called upon at a moment's notice to supplement already established Chaplain Corps members for any military operation (war or other hostile situation) that involves the calling up of additional Navy or Marine Corps members. All Navy Chaplains know that their services may be called upon whether or not they are members of the initial units responding to war or other hostile actions. For a Coast Guard Chaplain, the crashing of an airliner, a major catastrophe along the coast, or other such incident is equal to "war or other hostilities" for Navy and Marine Corps chaplains. A lesson learned is that ALL Coast Guard Chaplains (regardless of billet) MUST respond to such Coast Guard situations with the clear understanding that these kinds of events are "our wars or other hostilities." The mission of the Navy and Marine Corps is to prepare to fight and win a war. The comparable mission of the Coast Guard is to search and rescue or recover. Every Navy Chaplain must assume the mindset commensurate with the mission of the service to which he/she is assigned. For the Coast Guard Chaplain, it must always be SEMPER PARATUS.

Another area of concern is that of the relationship between the Chaplains and the CISM teams. All CG Chaplains are trained as pastoral care providers on CISM teams, which are primarily mental health providers. During disaster operations chaplains' primary mission and function is to provide direct pastoral care and counseling to the crewmembers and personnel involved in the rescue and recovery operations. Such ministry occurs before, during, and after the operations. When available, they will be part of the CISM teams. However, it should be the decision of the on-site supervisory Chaplain as to where each Chaplain asset should be assigned. Communication lines must remain open between the supervisory Chaplain, the CISM coordinator and any agencies or persons desiring the utilization of individual Chaplains for other particular functions. Only then can proper Chaplain coverage of pastoral care and comfort be provided.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. A minimum of 3 Chaplains must be sent to the disaster immediately upon approval of the cognizant district commander. Normally this will be the Area, the District and either the Regional Chaplain or a reservist. All Chaplains must be trained in Basic CISM.
2. Chaplains should be issued "All Access" cards by the FBI upon arrival or when available to ensure smooth entry to all areas necessary.
3. Chaplains should be rotated after serving 7-10 days on scene depending on the number of bodies recovered and size of the operation.
4. Immediate links with the Red Cross SAIR Team Coordinator and FBI Chaplains should be made to identify available resources.
5. Two phone lines for Chaplains are acquired at the command center.
6. Chaplains should bring a large number of business cards with cell phone number and pagers printed on them.
7. All Chaplains should carry cell phones and pagers. These are the primary means of communicating with each other and the operation center. Chaplains must be available during and after their times in the Command Center.
8. All CG Chaplains should request cell phones and pagers from their respective commands, dedicated for the sole official use of the Chaplain.
9. A laptop computer should be brought and kept online at all times at the Chaplain Center desk.
10. The senior chaplain should attend briefs given by the Senior Coast Guard Officer to the families or the press and be present at the daily NTSB briefings to the families.
11. Chaplains should visit all ship's Commanding Officers, Executive Officers, and Officers in Charge before and after visits to ship's crew.
12. Chaplains should maintain ready bags filled with a change of clothes and have their flight suit readily available in order to deploy to a ship on scene on a moment's notice.
13. Responding Chaplains should bring Bibles and devotional material for distribution. This means that they should have already procured enough of these materials well in advance in anticipation of their usage.

14. The Senior Chaplain must closely monitor the spiritual and emotional state of the Chaplains assigned.
15. All CG Chaplains should complete the following three CISM courses offered by ICISF:
Basic CISM, Disaster Management, and Individual Crisis Counseling/Peer Support
16. All Coast Guard Chaplains should attend Red Cross SAIR Team training in order to make personal contacts early and to understand the full nature of the SAIR operations.
17. A Chaplains/Religious support section be included in the FOG,
(Field Operation Guide) Incident Command System (ICS-OS-420-1/1996 ed.)

INDIVIDUAL ACCOMPLISHMENTS

The following were directly involved in the recovery operations of Alaska Air Flight 261:

LT Ronald R. Ringo, Jr., USCG D11 South District, San Pedro, CA

Total ministry days: **10+** Chaplain Ringo was designated on-scene Chaplain Coordinator by the PAC Area Chaplain. He directed all Coast Guard Chaplain resources until 15 February ensuring that delivery of ministry needs was met. Chaplain Ringo remained on-scene for the first 25+ hours providing counseling, CISM demobilizations and spiritual/emotional ministry.

Through his collaborative efforts with CISM Team leaders, involved units, other agencies, the CG Operations Center, Chaplain Ringo was able to ascertain and direct the necessary chaplain coverage to provide pastoral care and counseling for all units involved and assisting in the needs of the victims' families. Chaplain Ringo personally conducted numerous demobilizations, approximately 9 debriefings, 2 at sea worship services and numerous counseling sessions, while coordinating other chaplain efforts.

CAPT Ronald L. Swafford, PAC AREA/D11 Chaplain, Alameda, CA

Total ministry days: **6** Chaplain Swafford was the senior chaplain assigned to the scene. He mentored D11 Chaplain Ringo in the coordinating of efforts of the assigned chaplain assets. He was available as a CISM Team member the first two days, until tasked to assist with the memorial services and families of victim assistance. He was involved in the beachside memorial service for the families and coordinated the community memorial service held at Pepperdine University. He participated in that service, offering the closing prayer and the benediction. He was also the spiritual counselor in the two per day NTSB briefings to the victim's families at the Los Angeles Airport locations.

CDR Robert W. Marshall, D13 Chaplain, Seattle WA

Total ministry days: **4** Chaplain Marshall arrived willing and wanting to assist however needed. He was assigned to visit at-sea units involved in the recovery effort. He was tasked to transit with the departing CGC HAMILTON on extremely short notice. He transited from the crash site to San Diego, spending the next 24 hours without any of his personal belongings (even a toothbrush.) He provided several CISM debriefs to ships involved from the San Diego area, as well as to the HAMILTON. When he returned to the crash scene area he again took up the

role of a critical member of the ministry and CISM team, providing counsel and assistance in debriefings.

LCDR Barry Crane, D13 Reserve Chaplain, Seattle WA

Total ministry days: **2** Chaplain Crane also arrived willing to assist wherever needed. He was assigned to assist in pastoral/CISM visits to CGC involved in the recovery. He went to sea with other team members to provide deck plate ministry to affected units. When he returned he was assigned to assist as spiritual counsel for a family of rescuers CISM brief at ISC SAN PEDRO. Although he had an obligation that required him to return home the following day, Chaplain Crane played a vital role in the overall ability of caring for all of our affected Coast Guard family. Chaplain Crane exemplified the seamless nature of reserves and active duty working side-by-side in joint ministry.

LCDR Terrill Eldrith, D11 South Reserve Chaplain, San Diego, CA

Total ministry days: **1** Chaplain Eldrith assisted in conducting two CISM debriefs for the San Diego AIRSTA crewmembers. He also provided deck plate ministry to all those at the San Diego Activities Center.

CONCLUSION

Even in this unfortunate and disastrous incident, it was apparent that the Chaplains were essential, both to the Command Center, shipboard personnel, and to the families of the victims. Although the primary focus was always with the personnel involved in the recovery operations, Chaplains were also able to provide invaluable assistance to the Red Cross SAIR Team and the CISM Team. The key reasons for the successful implementation of Chaplains within this incident were the professional expertise; cooperation and the quick response of those called to provide ministry. It also was ministry without denominational lines, rank waving or “rice bowling.”

The Coast Guard Chaplains responded to our Coast Guard motto - **SEMPER PARATUS**.

