

Training Scenario Simulates Aircraft Event, Oil Spill, Life Preservation

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Response efforts are coordinated in the Emergency Operations Center, an integrated entity manned by naval air station leadership and staff and tenant command representatives. (U.S. Navy photo by Patrick Gordon)

NAVAL AIR STATION PATUXENT RIVER, Md. - The words "exercise, exercise, exercise," heard by the NAS Patuxent River Air Traffic Control Tower, kicked off a training event Sept. 28 that involved multiple N3 (Director, Operations) departments onboard the installation.

The scripted message that followed set the simulation scenario: "Tower, this is CS. We are the P-8 on takeoff runway 32. We just hit a flock of birds and lost both engines. We are going to put it in the water off the departure end of 32. We have 3+00 fuel and six souls onboard."

"The tower then knows they have a 'bird' going down and they'll pick up a crash phone which rings multiple entities across Pax River, putting everyone on alert and getting everyone turning up to respond," said Matt Nalley, Pax River's installation training officer. "The biggest portion of this particular training event was the N3 Division, which included fire and emergency services, security, Air Operations — and because the aircraft was in the water — Port Operations."

With the responsibility of safeguarding Navy personnel, contractors, families, veterans, retirees, equipment and assets onboard the air station, training scenarios help Pax River's first responders retain a high level of readiness.

"The [NAS commanding officer] was looking to run a drill that would test the capabilities of multiple departments and agencies and [this scenario] was based on an actual incident that happened at NAS Jacksonville last year when an aircraft slid off the runway into the river, which is an event that could very likely happen here," Nalley explained. "Once the action is started, we sit back and observe how the leaders and individuals who work in these different departments meld together to achieve the same outcome, which in this instance, was the preservation of life."

Using a combination of role players and mannequins, first responders on scene encountered victims with injuries as varied as minor concussion, dislocated shoulder and broken arm, as well as a more severe broken back, and one walking wounded with a major concussion and no idea where she was.

NAS Patuxent River Search and Rescue personnel train in rescuing a flight crew member from the river as part of an emergency response exercise Sept. 30. The drill simulated an aircraft forced to set down in the water after striking a flock of birds on takeoff and losing both engines. The training exercise involved multiple departments onboard the installation. (U.S. Navy photo by Amber Maurer)

"Using a dummy, we simulated one of the aircrew still in the water, which brought out the Search and Rescue helo," Nalley noted. "SAR identified where the victim was, hovered above the water, hoisted down a rescue swimmer, lowered a basket to secure the victim, and then simulated transport to a local hospital."

With the SAR helicopter kicking up sand, wind and rotor wash in the background, the rescue scene onshore was loud, wet and hectic.

"Fire department personnel were on the beach and I saw one position himself to shield a victim from being sprayed with water while he was doing his job getting her secured on a board and litter to be carried off the beach," Nalley said. "There was no fire this time, it was all about rescuing and caring for personnel and making sure everything was done to preserve life."

Sea dye was used to simulate a fuel spill in the river and Port Operations, whose primary function at Pax River is oil/fuel spill prevention and response, deployed containment boom around the spill while their Rapid Response Skimmer boat siphoned the mock fuel from the water via a conveyor-like filter belt.

"If it had been a real-life situation, that would've taken many hours, maybe even a few days," Nalley added.

While the main event was carried out at the incident site, a lot happened in the background inside the Emergency Operations Center, which is stood up following any emergency situation. The EOC is an integrated entity not only manned by naval air station leadership and staff, but also tenant command representatives. All information from the field is filtered through the EOC and reported to the NAS commanding officer, who serves as incident commander. The CO then directs what happens next, such as releasing emergency messages to personnel, gate closures, increased force protection conditions, building lockdowns, whether aircraft can fly in or out, etc.

"They have different challenges they have to achieve," Nalley said. "Once the CO is briefed on what the emergency is and what the response is, he can provide information up the chain of command."

When all was said and done, the training observers met back at Center Stage Theater for a "hotwash," an immediate after-action discussion and evaluation.

"We'll go down the line of our controllers and their areas of responsibility," Nalley said. "I always ask what they did right, what areas can use improvement, if their [pre-planned responses] are adequate, and if they'd change anything to their PPRs or the drill. This was the first time doing a drill like this one and now I've got the info I need to put together an official after-action report (AAR). Now we have an observation written down for the next time we do a similar drill. We'll be able to look back at this AAR and see what worked, what we can improve, or what should be stricken as unhelpful."

Nalley explained that ongoing, varied training is necessary to keep any crisis response seamless.

"We try to set up scenarios for what we're going to do on our worst day," he said. "There's a response that's needed and there's training needed for those responses. It's all about planning, knowing how to respond, understanding how you fit into the team and what you're responsible for. In my opinion, frequent training keeps people on their toes and you change things up so you don't have complacency. Then, when the CO is asleep in the middle of the night and that call comes in to the CDO or the 911 system, all those responders will have that muscle memory, and when the CO does get contacted, he'll already know his base is being taken care of."

