When the jet 'exploded'

Was BWI ready?

Story and photos by Fred Abel

Friday morning's weather, sunny with a gentle breeze from the west, was a perfect for flying, and jets roared in and out of Baltimore-Washington International. Suddenly, a puff of yellow and red smoke over runway 22 alerted the flight control tower of disaster.

The aircraft—said to be a Boeing 747 with 180 aboard—had collided with a fuel tanker and exploded. The next few moments were intense. An alarm activated airport emergency teams. Within 20 minutes, paramedic units from Baltimore, Howard and Anne Arundel Counties would arrive. And technicians with radio transceivers packed in a camera case would be in satellite communications with medical experts at airports as far away as New Mexico.

But in those first moments after the crash, the wailing of 180 burned and maimed bodies drifted with the smoke and rising heat over the airline wreckage.

Paramedics at BWI had their hands full Friday handling a number of emergency situations. Above, an EMT puts one of the "walking wounded" off the runway. Center, a technician uses a radio satellite link to a Texas hospital physician to care for a seriously injured passenger. Above, right, another rescuer checks the tag identifying a victim's injury status.

'80 burns would tax our hospitals'

—Dr. R. Adams Cowley

If it had been a real accident, the simulated airline explosion at BWI Friday morning would have been a major aviation disaster, with the death count over 100 and many other passengers permanently disfigured.

But as it was, the Boeing jet was actually a medium-sized prop plane, the 180 passengers students from four high schools and the blood and gore a mixture of vaseline, tissue paper, shoe polish and red dye.

The simulated airline crash and response from more than 100 emergency medical technicians — called a mealage — was the result of a full year of planning, led principally by the Maryland Institute of Emergency Medical Service (MIEMS), more commonly referred to as the Shock-Trauma Unit at University of Maryland Hospital.

The mealage tested not only the adequacy of medical services in case of an actual BWI tragedy, but also it brought new technology using satellites into the treatment of seriously injured airline passengers.

Some of the injured Friday were brought by stretcher to an area where NASA officials had set up a camera linked by satellite to major hospital in San Antonio, Texas. There, doctors with expertise in airline disaster medical care advised the medical technicians at BWI how to treat the injured.

I.T. Gallenne, NASA's senior electronic engineer, said the portable transceiver developed at Goddard Space Flight Center could some day save lives should it be used in a major aviation disaster.

"With so many victims, a doctor or two out here couldn't possibly handle all of it," he said. "If we were to try to take care of it locally, it may be too late for some of them."

The satellite link Friday operated smoothly, according to Dr. Andrew M. Munster, director of Baltimore City Hospitals' Burn Unit, who was monitoring the conventional transmission between BWI and San Antonio.

"What's amazing is that it's traveling 21,000 miles up there," Dr. Munster said as an airport paramedic spoke with a doctor several thousand miles across the country at Brooke Army Medical Center.

Doctor: "Would you examine his pupils now, please?"

Paramedic: (After looking at victim's eyes) "Pupils seem to be active, but sluggish."

Doctor: "Well, I think you should go ahead and administer an I.V."

Dr. R. Adams Cowley, Shock-Trauma Unit director, said the response time of emergency vehicles from BWI and the counties was expedient, but that the Baltimore region would need a better evacuation system in the event of a real catastrophe.

"We've got 80 severe burns here. Those 80 burns have to be treated, but they would tax our hospitals here. They'd have to be taken to other burn units in Virginia and elsewhere," he said.

The accident scene, acted out by students from Archbishop Keough, Cardinal Gibbons, Martin Spaulding and Catonsville High Schools and Army personnel from Fort George G. Meade, brought to life the trauma inherent in a major aviation disaster.

A brunette woman's license was partially burned off, revealing a pink bathing suit top underneath. A man, supposedly naked and severely burned, wore only shorts, sneakers and the black and red make-up applied earlier Friday morning in an airport hangar. All the bodies bore tags telling their injuries. The man, the tag said, would be dead in two hours.

The make-up applied to the student "victims" brought realism to the staged event. David Pepper, a recruit from the American Red Cross unit in Bethesda, lay close to the underside of the aircraft, his open shirt revealing where a flying piece of glass had pierced his heart. If it had been a real crash, Pepper would have died instantly.

Other students, playing passengers who were only slightly wounded, walked among the bodies screaming for their loved ones. "Oh, he's dead, he's dead," one girl cried as a rescuer tried to pry her away from the still body.

"Now you stay here. He's going to die if you don't leave me alone," the medic said, forcing the girl off the runway, smiling at her persistence.

Jeffrey Mitchell, Shock-Trauma's organizer of the student volunteers, said some of the "victims" had instructions to act hysterically until given a sedative, taken away or given a useful task by the rescuers.

"As you can see, it takes up manpower and that's a real problem with disasters," he said. "They could handle a girl like that very easily" if properly trained. But he added, "Behavioral training is not adequate" for state paramedics.

One Shock-Trauma evaluator said the emergency teams, which arrived only three minutes after the puff of smoke appeared, did a good job scanning the accident scene for the most seriously injured passengers. "They found the patients we put over in the woods to test this," she said. The observer noted, however, that it appeared the rescue crews may have tried to help too many persons who had little chance of survival, "when maybe they should leave them for someone who is more viable."

As in the mock disaster at BWI, emergency crews would actually place color-coded tags on bodies which tell stretcher crews who to carry out first. Walking wounded and persons needing instant treatment are distinguished from those victims either killed or beyond saving. Each students also carried a time card which will tell medical officials whether the medics effectively treated the victims correctly and on time.

Dr. Munster, observing the satellite transmission cases, said the operation was "going a little bit slower than it would. I think they're trying not to make any mistakes. If this were a mass emergency situation, they would be stabilizing the bodies and moving them out."

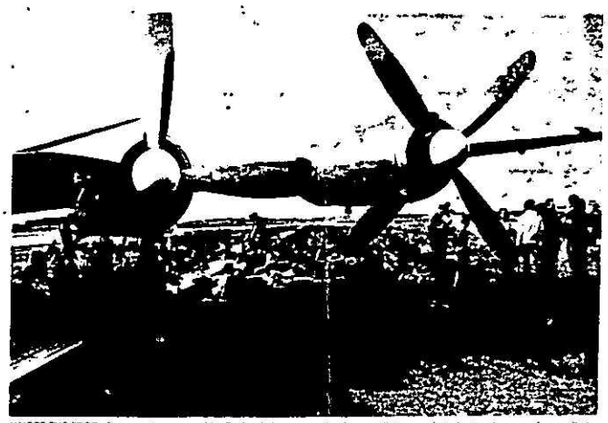
Out on the runway, some rescuers appeared confused by the sorting process. "Hey Jack, what goes first? The red?" asked one man. "Yeh, the red. But if you can't find them, just take anybody," his buddy replied. One paramedic said the wind blowing the tags made finding the priority victims difficult.

In about two hours, though, the smoke had cleared and all but a few "victims" were left waiting for the ride in an ambulance to the BWI fire station, where doctors decided where to send the wounded. One student who had been acting as a burn victim, worried about what would happen if a real aircraft explosion occurred with her aboard. "If I'm ever in an accident, I don't want to suffer. I hope I die immediately," Emily DeHoyer said.

The only real accident last week, though, came when one student, Carla Castello, 18, of Annapolis, was stung on the knee by a bee just prior to the start of the mealage. Otherwise, most officials and "victims" were satisfied that the test of BWI's emergency capabilities was successful.

JOHN ALBRECHT, receiving his injuries

FREDA SHARRETT, a volunteer victim



UNDER THE PROP of an airplane owned by Butler Aviation are the Army enlistees and students who served as realistic accident victims.