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Ground Response

The mid-air collision over Germany

On the night of July 1, 2002, several people around Lake Constance, Bodensee in Germany, witnessed a major air collision above the clouds. Many initially thought it was the beginning of a thunderstorm, though others registered a “loud bang that made windows and furniture tremble”.

The small town of Überlingen is located on the northwest shore of Lake Constance in Baden-Württemberg, Germany. From here, Highway 31 as well as several county and national routes, lead into the area from the villages and communities between Owingen and Taisersdorf. An area of about 30 km² was affected as a result of the plane collision in Germany, that took place at 1135 on July 1, 2002.

Chronology of the incident

At 2100 a “Tupolev 154” from the “Bashkirian Airlines” (Russian Federation; flight number BTC 2937) left Moscow Airport for Barcelona, Spain. With a flight crew of 12 there were five adults, nine children and 48 young people between 12 and 18 years old on board. The group was on a school trip. At 2106 a cargo plane from “DHL Worldwide Express”, flight number DHX 611, got clearance from the Italian airport, Bergamo for its flight to Brussels, Belgium, with a cargo of about seven tons of letters and parcels. Only a few minutes before the collision there was a fatal misunderstanding between the “Swiss Skyguide”, the Russian pilots and the automatic “Traffic Alert and Collision Avoidance System” (TCAS) onboard the planes. That misunderstanding was the cause of the collision. At exactly 2135.32 the TU 154 and the BO 757 crashed at right-angles 004 north, 274 west at 10,760 metres and dropped down into the residential areas of Owingen, Taisersdorf and Brachenreute.

The two Boeing pilots and the 61 passengers of the Tupolev were killed immediately.

Incident alarms

Only a few minutes after the collision the Integrated Dispatch Centre (fire and emergencies) at Lake Constance County, Bodenseekreis in Friedrichshafen got their

first emergency calls. Initially, people reported a forest fire north of Überlingen“, several “small fires between Überlingen and Owingen” and one call speculated about a “small plane crash”. At 2146 one inhabitant told the dispatchers that he had found “a burning undercarriage of a plane” near Taisersdorf. Following that call the dispatch centre proceeded on the basis that there must be a large aeroplane crash or a forced emergency landing in the region around Überlingen.

Immediately after receiving the first emergency calls, at 2140, the dispatch centre had already called the two task forces from Überlingen Volunteer Fire Department. The neighbour dispatch centre in Sigmaringen had independently called the Volunteer Fire Departments of Herdwangen, Schönach and Owingen with the words “Flight crash” and “Technical emergency support” at 2144. The ambulances from Überlingen and Stockach were called at 2145. The dispatch centres at Lake Constance County, Sigmaringen County and Constance County also called additional fire and emergency units comprising:

- Two helicopters of the “Swiss Air Rescue” (Rega);
- Task force 1 and 3 of the Überlingen Fire Department;
- Four more ambulances (RTW) from Friedrichshafen, Pfullendorf and Salem;
- “Rapid Medical Task Forces” (SEG) from Überlingen, Markdorf, Meersburg, Immenstaad and Friedrichshafen.

Because of the uncertain situation and speculation that a plane might have crashed into the western part of Lake Constance, additional water rescue units from around the lake were also called in.

Technical incident command

At 0120 on Tuesday July 2 the “Technical Incident Command” (TEL), located in the Überlingen fire station, received information that the tail of a crashed plane had been found near Taisersdorf, along with dead bodies and body parts, near Brachenreute village. The tail and several of the “Tupolev 154” engines were found at 0200, also near Brachenreute.

As a result of these more detailed reports the incident command now had to expect a large number of missing, injured or dead flight passengers. More messages about deaths and body parts were received at 0138 and 0145.

At 0150 the dispatch centre called K9-units (rescue dog units) from all over the state. Incident Management Team Commander Louis Laurösch, Fire Chief of Friedrichshafen Fire Department first set up three incident sections when TEL started working at 0115:

- Brachenreute - Tupolev crash area;
- Taisersdorf - Boeing crash area;
- Owingen - crash area containing large plane parts, fatalities and body parts.

He also set up several central points around the incident area to concentrate fire and emergency apparatus and rescue workers.

On Tuesday at 0620, the plane crash became a police situation. After discussions

between the political district administrator and the police command, an order was given to disband the incident command (TEL) right away. This decision was not accepted by incident commanders, firefighters and emergency workers. "Especially as several follow-up fire operations made the TEL necessary after the breakup ...", Incident Commander Louis Laurösch said, "from a human and psychological perspective there must be the opportunity for rescue workers to bring the operation to an end for themselves as well as to come to terms with the largely traumatic nature of this incident".

Search and rescue

Because of earlier speculations that a plane might have crashed into Lake Constance, more than 15 boats from the fire and water rescue units formed a search line on the "Überlinger See" - a part of Lake Constance - between Unteruhldingen and Ludwigshafen, supported by police helicopters.

Nothing was found despite three search operations, so water rescue operations were stopped on the morning of July 2.

From 0210 K9-Units, firefighters and emergency personnel set up five groups to search the areas around Brachenreute, Owingen, Taisersdorf and Überlingen. Many of the victims' bodies and body parts were found in the fields and on roofs of the houses as well as small and large pieces of wreckage.

On July 2 police command asked the "Technisches Hilfswerk" (THW), special federal technical emergency unit in Germany, to assist with the recovery of wrecks in co-operation with the Public Prosecutor's Office, the "Federal Criminal Investigation Department" (BKA), the German "Federal Bureau of Aircraft Accidents Investigation" (BFU) and medical experts. More than 150 THW members from 13 local units worked about 4500 hours up to Monday July 8.

The air collision killed 71 passengers but nobody on the ground was killed or injured, even though the planes came down near the city of Überlingen and Camphill School. Only two structures were slightly damaged; parts of them burning for a short time. About 3,000 litres of Kerosene had to be pumped out of the wrecks.

From a tactical point of view, the plane crash at Lake Constance was largely a technical rescue operation involving more than 1,100 firefighters, medical personal and rescue workers with about 250 fire and rescue trucks and ambulances.

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