

ASCE | *The newspaper for members of the
American Society of Civil Engineers*

news

Terrorism Drill Staged at Boston Airport

By Mark Fitzgerald

On June 4, in an exercise intended to test emergency response procedures, authorities at Boston's Logan International Airport staged a terrorist "attack" that involved a United Airlines aircraft, two military jets, and more than 50 local, state, and federal agencies. Dubbed Operation Atlas, the drill assumed that a commercial airliner carrying 169 passengers from Paris to Chicago had been hijacked by terrorists. Two F-15 Eagle fighter jets from Otis Air Force Base, on Cape Cod, intercepted the aircraft and forced it to land at Logan. After the plane landed, tactical teams from the state police and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) rushed the plane and rescued "hostages" before arresting two "terrorists."

"Having a confirmed hijacking, a confirmed bomb, and a confirmed fire with two terrorists shot on the aircraft, you begin preparing for the worst," says Thomas Kinton, the airport's director of aviation. "Once the aircraft touches down, we begin a hostage negotiation. FBI negotiators try to reason with the terrorists, who end up throwing a body out on the tarmac and eventually setting a bomb off on board the plane, prompting assault teams to storm the aircraft."

Funded with a grant from the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), the cost of the exercise was approximately \$700,000 and involved such groups as the Massachusetts Port Authority, Boston's fire and police departments, the mayor's office, the city's emergency medical services, the state police, the FBI, the DHS, the

Transportation Security Administration, the North American Aerospace Defense Command, U.S. Customs and Border Protection, and the U.S. Coast Guard. Although the drill lasted only from early morning to mid-afternoon, it was the culmination of more than eight months of planning and marked the first time a commercial airliner had been intercepted in flight as part of a training event.

“I think everybody did a great job,” Kinton adds. “But I think part of that ‘great job’ is stepping up and saying what didn’t go well because the reason you’re doing this is [that] you want to learn. We know we’re not perfect, and the drill helped show us where we have a lot of work to do.” Communication is one of the main areas that Kinton sees as needing improvement. “After having gone through the drill we can see that communication is going to need a lot of attention,” he says. “But at least now we know who the players are and we’re all sharing information.”

Kinton, who graduated from Merrimack College with a bachelor’s degree in civil engineering, points out that Logan plans to upgrade its emergency operation center (EOC) to meet the communication demands that would arise in a full-scale emergency. “You have to have the right communication capabilities, a wide screen, real-time downlink, so that decision makers in the EOC can get information and see what’s going on instantaneously,” he says. “We have a grant for two hundred fifty thousand dollars that we’re planning to use to improve our EOC around some areas that we found could be better designed or were deficient in terms of getting the job done.”

Officials from several other airports, including Dallas/Fort Worth International Airport, San Francisco International Airport, and London’s Gatwick Airport, also attended the exercise and recorded their observations—analyses that are expected to serve as useful resources in the event of actual emergencies.