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NATIONAL TRANSPORTATION SAFETY BOARD
WASHINGTON, D.C.

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(202) 426-8787

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Forwarded to:

Honorable John L. McLucas
Administrator
Federal Aviation Administration
Washington, D. C. 20591

SAFETY RECOMMENDATION(S)

A-76-138 through 140

On April 27, 1976, American Airlines Flight 625, a Boeing 727-95, crashed during an attempted takeoff from an aborted landing on runway 9 at Harry S Truman Airport, St. Thomas, Virgin Islands. The aircraft was destroyed by impact and fire; thirty-seven persons died in the accident. The National Transportation Safety Board's investigation of the crash revealed that the airport operations manual had several outdated sections, that firefighters failed to bring necessary equipment to the accident site, that airport management did not adequately oversee airport operations during the emergency, and that the airport does not have a direct emergency telephone line.

Specifically, outdated sections of the airport operations manual included the emergency alarm system and its usage, the numbers and types of crash/fire/rescue (CFR) vehicles, and descriptions of airport personnel duties. In addition, during its investigation of an Alaska Airlines accident at Ketchikan International Airport, Ketchikan, Alaska, April 5, 1976, the Safety Board also found that airport's operations manual to be out of date. It is required that the manuals be kept current by 14 CFR 139.31. The Safety Board believes that approved airport operating procedures must be published to facilitate their understanding, and that the operations manuals must be kept current in the interest of safety of certificated airports.

At St. Thomas, when airport CFR personnel responded to the accident, they did not take any of the available air packs, nor all of the available proximity suits to the accident site. Such equipment is necessary to protect firefighters and to enable them to assist survivors. The airport emergency plan and CFR procedures should be revised to insure that the required CFR equipment is taken to an accident site.

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When Flight 625 crashed, all airport CFR personnel responded immediately. Since the CFR crew chief was also the ranking Port Authority official on duty at Truman Airport, no Port Authority official remained on the airport to oversee the airport operations. For example, airport management did not physically inspect the runway before air traffic operations were resumed. Although airport management failed to discuss inspection of the runway with tower personnel, tower personnel did inspect the runway visually. Several light aircraft operations and one air carrier (B-727) operation took place within 30 minutes after the accident, although no CFR protection was available on the airport. The Safety Board believes that the airport operations manual should be revised further to insure a continuity of command at the airport.

When Harry S Truman Airport was first certificated, a direct emergency telephone line was installed which linked the control tower with the airport CFR station, the Insular Fire Department, and the Port Authority's offices. The August 20, 1973, certification inspection revealed that this line was malfunctioning, and as a result, the CFR alerting system was inadequate. Sometime before the American Airlines accident, the direct line was removed, which left only commercial telephone lines as the means of communications with facilities off the airport.

The removal of the direct line was not approved by the FAA's Airport District Office which certificated the airport, nor was it reflected in the airport operations manual. Further, Insular Fire Department personnel were not aware that the line had been removed. Since there are only two fire departments on St. Thomas, their mutual support is essential. The Safety Board believes that a rapid and simple means of communications is required to provide control and coordination in an emergency, and that this is best provided by a direct emergency telephone line; radio communications and commercial telephone lines should be used as secondary means. The Safety Board believes that the Insular Fire Department should be included on the Port Authority's discrete radio frequency to allow immediate communications even if commercial lines were disabled and to provide communications at an accident site.

Accordingly, the National Transportation Safety Board recommends that the Federal Aviation Administration:

Insure that procedures in the operations manuals of airports certificated under 14 CFR 139 are current and applicable to the airport. (Class II, Priority Followup.) (A-76-138)

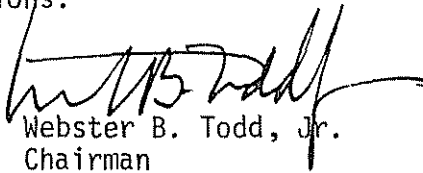
Institute, through the regional offices of the Office of Airport Programs, a program to emphasize to airport management the importance of a continual, critical review and update of airport operations manuals. (Class III, Longer Term Followup.) (A-76-139)

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Require that the Virgin Islands Port Authority revise its operating procedures at Harry S Truman Airport to insure that:

- (a) All necessary CFR equipment, especially air packs and proximity suits, is brought to an accident site on the responding CFR vehicles;
- (b) the direct emergency line is reinstalled to provide immediate communications between the airport and Insular Fire Department;
- (c) the Insular Fire Department be included on the Virgin Islands Port Authority radio frequency for accident notification and control purposes; and
- (d) procedures for proper continuity of airport command during emergencies be included in the Harry S Truman Airport operations manual. (Class II, Priority Followup.) (A-76-140)

TODD, Chairman, BAILEY, Vice Chairman, McADAMS, HOGUE, and HALEY, Members, concurred in the above recommendations.


By: Webster B. Todd, Jr.
Chairman

THESE RECOMMENDATIONS WILL BE RELEASED TO THE PUBLIC ON THE ISSUE DATE SHOWN ABOVE. NO PUBLIC DISSEMINATION OF THE CONTENTS OF THIS DOCUMENT SHOULD BE MADE PRIOR TO THAT DATE.