



So you think you're **prepared for a crisis?**

Well, so did a South Island operator. Then they had a real crisis, and it taught them what they still needed to do.

The first thing that happened was the pilot, working remotely in from the West Coast, did not make his 'ops normal' call, and his helicopter stopped emitting signals from the automatic flight following system.

They waited 20 minutes and he missed the next prearranged ops normal call.

They rang somebody official, and the official told them the tracking software was still working.

So, disbelievingly, and quelling rising panic, they opened up their emergency checklist...

The law

Riki Tahau is the CAA's manager of health and safety. It's his role to monitor compliance with the principles, duties and rights of the Health and Safety at Work Act 2015.

"There's now a requirement for emergency preparedness to be planned for, and practised to an extent that is reasonably practicable, and that will work in relation to the nature and risk of the work carried out."

If there's the possibility of a life being lost, a business not only has a duty to manage the risk of that beforehand, but equally, to manage any emerging situation afterwards.

"There needs to be a plan," Riki says. "It needs to be documented. Everybody from senior management all the way to the shop floor should know what could go wrong inside the business, and be trained and confident in what to do if the worst happens."

It doesn't have to be complicated, but it does have to be effective.

Riki recommends starting with a brainstorm with all staff on what could go wrong – part of any Safety Management System – and who does what if the worst should happen.

"You'd be surprised what you can learn when everyone in the organisation is involved."

After a plan has been formally designed, Riki says it needs to be practised regularly.

"Sometimes there's no real emergency plan, so nobody is too sure what to do. Or there is a plan, but it's been locked away in a drawer and not rehearsed, so there's still indecision about what to do.

"People can die during the delay caused by poor decision-making after an event."

Riki says the 'lens' that health and safety law uses to assess what an organisation did after a fatal accident is, 'should they have reasonably known what to do?'

Phoning people

"The first thing we realised," says the CEO of the South Island operation, "was that our telephone list was out-of-date.

"When we rang the flight-following satellite phone on board the helicopter, my son, who was elsewhere, answered. Over time, there'd been a series of phones and a series of sim cards passed around, and my son had inherited the number."

"Everybody from senior management all the way to the shop floor should know what could go wrong inside the business..."

He also says to have a Plan B list.

"Because the key people on your A list may not be around, or answering.

"You can also get caught in a phone loop. The Rescue Coordination Centre ringing you back, the Department of Conservation ringing you back, and you can go round and round in circles on missed calls. So have a plan to divert your main line to a cell.

"Also, if someone's rung 111, that line won't be released perhaps for quite a while, so plan to use the cellphones of your staff."

A recent visit by staff from the Rescue Coordination Centre (RCCNZ) was fresh in the CEO's mind and one of his first calls was to them.

"You're not wasting their time, you're not troubling them, and they have access to resources you don't. Like contact with a local police officer who knows the area, and contact with air traffic control who in turn can ask airlines flying through the region to try to make contact with your missing pilot."

The RCCNZ says to call immediately an aircraft has missed its scheduled check-in time.

"Time is the difference between life and death in rescue situations," says Paul Craven, Deputy Manager of Operations.

"The sooner we find out, the faster our team can locate the aircraft. There's no cost for contacting RCCNZ in these situations, but a life is priceless.

"If you do find the aircraft safe and sound yourselves, you can always call us again and we'll stand down.

"We're here to help and it works out best for everyone that we're kept in the loop."

Something nobody would probably think about unless they'd been through it

Emma Tilyard from V3 Heli in Taihape says their emergency plan was based very much on their experience in three real-life emergency situations.

Her husband, Mark, helped to rebuild a company he was working for, after an accident involving another pilot. He then witnessed, and was first on the scene, at a second helicopter accident. And he was a passenger in a third accident.

Emma says being involved with anyone on board significantly adds to the emotional factor and can affect the way you respond.

"In those accidents, even though Mark was okay, I was floored – quite literally. When he called to say he'd survived, I went from standing up to being on the ground, because I knew other people involved."

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Emma says if anything does go wrong with their operation's single helicopter, it will be Mark at the controls, and she will need back-up if he has an accident.

"I went through the emergency plan detail by detail. For instance, who do I call to look after our children, while I'm dealing with any emergency?"

"We've now spoken to somebody we know really well – a very experienced SAR officer – who is not in aviation but who is now part of our emergency response plan.

"If the SOS goes off, he gets notified and will jump into coordinating our emergency response."

In her plan, one of Emma's first calls will be to RCCNZ.

"Rather than just 'box-tick' calling them, I rang them to ask what information they would need me to have ready and what happens once I've made that call. They were awesome and I now know that ringing them early is okay – they'd rather that than lose 20 minutes of you saying, 'oh, I'll wait just a bit longer'."

Because of their real-life experience being on the edge of three emergencies, Emma and Mark know communication is king.

"If Mark notices Spidertracks has stopped working, he'll call me to say he's fine. We use a personal locator beacon, a little hand-held device, that has different buttons on the face: a check-in button, an 'I'm ok but need help' button, and an SOS button that goes straight through to RCCNZ as well.

"Of course, somebody has to be conscious to press the button, but it is added peace of mind."

Emma says much of her plan was designed after Grant White and Matt Chappell, from the CAA's helicopter and agricultural unit, visited their operation.

"They were asking me things I hadn't thought about, like what would I do if the media start calling. Reporters can be really insistent and with social media, and people able to take cellphone pictures, reporters could hear about the accident even before you do.

"I'm going to prepare some media release templates that just need filling in with the details, so that will lighten the burden as well."

Emma says a "massive thing" for her was to talk to other operators.

"We could share 'lessons learned' especially with pilots who had been through an emergency."

The RCCNZ was only one call she made, to understand what would happen in an emergency.

"I've made sure I understand all about Christchurch Control and air traffic control and their role, and that of all the other contacts that seem to come up in emergency plans.

"I wanted the plan to fit us and our company. I didn't want a cut and paste where I said I would ring this number next, without understanding why I was calling that number.

"I think it's really important that your action plan is not just a series of box ticks."

"It gets a little bit dreadful"

Back at the South Island operation, the CEO was learning what the emotional aspect of having your pilot missing can do to your functioning.

"It gets a little bit dreadful quite quickly.

"I struggled to read out to RCCNZ the last coordinates from the tracking before it stopped, because I was so distracted by what might have happened; by what might be ahead of us.

"Grant White had been to see us not long before and he'd talked about that emotional side of things. He'd suggested we arrange for somebody, not as involved, to come in and give us a hand.

"That advice was fresh in our minds, so our office administrator contacted another operator and immediately they were at her side helping out."

The CEO also contacted other operators for help in the search. "They cut their scenic flights short, off-loaded their passengers, and headed off. Everybody pitched in."

The call came from RCCNZ. An Air New Zealand flight had made contact with the pilot. He was fine.

"That was wonderful to hear," says the CEO. "It was just so mountainous where our guy was, that it took a plane at 30,000 ft to be able to make contact."

It turned out, the 'somebody official' the CEO had first rung had got it wrong. The iridium satellite was out and had taken tracking with it. And the satellite phone. None of the other operators had been affected because their pilots were flying locally and were communicating by radio.

Forty minutes after the South Island operator activated their emergency response, the emergency was over.

Other operators who'd been called on to help, visited and told the CEO, "that was one hell of a drill". They said it had given them something to think about in terms of their own emergency plans.

"So our plan has been updated, in light of what we went through," says the CEO. "Now I would always go to the tracking provider first to check, and not rely on anyone else."

"We also changed our exposition with our re-certification to have hourly reporting.

"In the future, I'd also make use of Flightradar24.com. I know it's a bit of a novelty but it would give me the location of major aircraft in the search area."

The CEO has also learned any emergency planning needs to be practised.

"Even though we've been through it for real, we still need to drill, because ironically, the pilot didn't take part in the scare and there were other staff who weren't at work that day."

A back-up means of communication is also part of the updated emergency plan. Their aircraft have radios with access to the Department of Conservation repeater network, so the operation will use those repeaters to speak to DOC, to relay an 'I'm safe' message to base. An employee from a local café has also been trained up and is on standby to help the South Island operation in any future emergency response.

Grant White says they'll be someone a bit uninvolved who can answer phones and take notes, perhaps on an electronic device.

"You need someone who can document what each person does as they do it. It helps the internal investigation, and if the worst should happen and it ends up in court or subject to a health and safety investigation, you have to have all that documented.

"Somebody will 'ask the question' somewhere along the line, and if those notes are available it takes the pressure off."

Grant advises operators to refresh emergency response training every three months.

"Even if it's just looking over the flight follower's shoulder and asking, 'what would you do right now if that aircraft fails to make their standard ops-normal radio call?'"

Grant also suggests that all vehicles be equipped with a copy of the emergency procedures, and they should also be on everyone's electronic device.

"You cannot ever be too prepared." ■



Photo courtesy of Rescue Coordination Centre.

If your aircraft is overdue, call the RCCNZ straight away.