

Who ya gonna call?

24-7 Boeing team helps steer Air Force air crews through emergencies

By Forrest Gossett

A Boeing-built B-52 Stratofortress bomber was on a routine U.S. Air Force mission last year when the flight crew reported a problem that was cause for major concern. While the aircraft was climbing, it experienced a hydraulic-system issue coupled with a serious flight-controls failure.

And there was the possibility that things could get worse. The crew was concerned about a complete loss of the rudder-elevator hydraulics, which would make controlling the airplane almost impossible. The crewmembers called back to the base for assistance. At the receiving end of the call was Lt. Col. Alan Parmater, 11th

an engineering safety manager. “Dinner, sleep, night out with the family—all takes second place.”

Snellenberg added that his group’s input is just one part of the larger team effort. “The Air Force is very good at resolving problems,” he said. “Frequently, we are called in just to confirm what the crews are thinking about how to handle the emergency.”

Over the years, Snellenberg said there have been many memorable opportunities to help. Among them: During a KC-135 flight over Turkey, the aircraft’s starboard main landing gear disconnected and was literally hanging from the plane. The team’s biggest fear was that when landing, the loose gear could interfere with the airframe and rupture a fuel line or spin the aircraft out of control.



Members of the Boeing Emergency Response team include (from left) Trent Linder, Matt Archer, Jeff Howell, Bob Snellenberg, Dennis Struve, Rick Kahler and Sean Martin. **TED WHITESIDE/BOEING**

Bomb Squadron assistant director of academics, who that day was tasked with helping crews handle sticky in-flight situations.

Normally the Air Force handles in-flight emergencies, many of which go unreported to Boeing. But once in a while, something happens that’s so serious the Air Force seeks additional flight guidance from Boeing. This was one of those times—a situation that required a team of Boeing experts to provide critical support.

After talking with the crew and going through the emergency checklist, Parmater called the Boeing in-flight emergency response team. The team, made up of five core members who can contact 20 or so other Boeing experts who are on call around the clock, is carrying on a 50-year tradition of providing support for B-52 and KC-135 crews experiencing in-flight emergencies.

Bob Snellenberg, the team’s leader, said each time their pager sounds, team members know that lives could depend on their actions and knowledge. “When that pager sounds, we know it’s serious, and we move quickly,” said team member Matt Archer,

Working with the Air Force, the Boeing crew advised the pilot to decrease fuel load, make plans for a crash landing, and land the plane with the barely attached gear. During the landing, the damaged gear rotated back to the proper position and wedged against the airplane structure, allowing a near normal roll-out to a stop.

In the B-52 emergency, the Boeing team worked with the aircrew and formulated a plan. As half of flight-control hydraulic power for the airplane had been lost, it was crucial that a landing be made quickly before the system deteriorated even further. Boeing recommended an expeditious landing despite adverse weather conditions. The plane was diverted to Dyess Air Force Base, Texas, where it circled near the runway while the airplane burned off fuel, reducing weight, and where it landed without incident.

“Their expertise is credible because they have history on these weapons systems,” Parmater said of the Boeing team. “They are an important part of the team.” ■

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