Firefighters get crash course on aircraft rescues

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A plane "crashed" in a field in Dubois County on Wednesday night, and members of local fire departments were tasked with assisting those trapped inside. The cabin door was unopenable, as was the emergency exit. First responders needed to cut into the plane to get inside.

"How are we going to get in here?" asked Chris Collins, manager at the Mt. Vernon Outland Airport in Illinois. "Where are we going to cut to get in?"

This wreck was only a simulation, but before participating in an educational workshop at the Huntingburg Airport Wednesday night, local departments might not have had good answers to those questions. A real-life slip-up could be fatal.

"Not knowing how to access the aircraft, that's the worst," Collins said in an interview inside an airport hangar. "If you have to get in to somebody, and you don't know how to do it, people could perish before the airplane gets breached."

Collins and Huntingburg Airport Manager Travis McQueen orchestrated a series of presentations and exercises that familiarized about 35 area firefighters from five county departments with what to do if they ever need to do just that. Members of local units were formally briefed on the intricacies of plane rescue situations during the three-and-a-half-hour event. Representatives from the Jasper, Huntingburg, Ferdinand, Holland and St. Henry volunteer fire departments attended.

It was relevant because in recent years, planes and helicopters have crashed at the Huntingburg airport and conservation club, in Ferdinand and near Ireland.

"All the crop dusting, all the stuff that goes on around here, it just makes you nervous," said Steve Eckert, chief of the St. Henry Volunteer Fire Department.

Attendees learned that different kinds of planes require different approaches based on how they're constructed and where

Training

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wires, cables, tubing, lines and other heavy structural items are located inside their fuselages. The group explored the ins and outs of three planes based at the airport, as well as a training fuselage Collins towed to the workshop.

In July 2013, a crop duster crashed by the Huntingburg Conservation Club lake. The pilot, who was pinned inside the plane in the accident, was extricated from the plane successfully, but Eckert admitted responders winged it. In the process, the plane body took the St. Henry department's Jaws of Life to its limits, and members had to work quickly to find an area they could slice through.

Rodney Gogel, St. Henry's second assistant fire chief, helped cut out the pilot at the real extrication about five years ago. He recalled the plane was scattered about the scene when he arrived.

"This is the real one," he remembered thinking when he saw the fractured plane. "This is the real stuff. Oh my gosh."

Firefighters who attended Wednesday's event are trained regularly in how to respond to automobile accidents, but not aviation accidents. Huntingburg's Assistant Fire Chief Glen Kissling pointed out that the area is within a flight pattern for the Evansville Regional Airport. →

"So, anything's possible," he said.

McQueen wanted to host the event to increase the firefighters' familiarity with planes.

"The bottom line is incidents happen," McQueen said before the event. "That's just real life. That's just like a vehicle. And so we want to be absolutely trained and properly trained for our first responders to respond to aircraft incidents or accidents, because it could be somebody's life at stake."

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Brian Kunkler, left, Brent "Fuzz" Tobin and Rodney Gogel, all of St. Henry, examine the interior of a plane during firefighter training at Huntingburg Airport on Wednesday. The training provided an opportunity for first responders to better understand an airplane and what tools are necessary to make a rescue. Firefighters from the Jasper, Huntingburg, St. Henry, Holland and Ferdinand volunteer fire departments attended the training.

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