

Crisis Management Case Studies



Tropical Cyclone Ului, a Category 3 storm system with winds gusts of up to 200 kilometres, crossed the north Queensland coast at 1:00am, Sunday 21 March 2010. The impact caused widespread but moderate damage across the region and cut power for several days to an estimated 60,000 homes and businesses between Airlie Beach and Townsville.

Great Barrier Reef Airport, Hamilton Island

www.hamiltonisland.com.au/airport/

Great Barrier Reef Airport is located on Hamilton Island and is the major gateway for visitors to the Whitsunday Islands Group. The airport is serviced by three airlines Qantaslink, Jetstar and Virgin Blue. Skystar Airport Services, a Ground Handling company owned by Perth based company Monadelphous Group Ltd, provides check-in and baggage handling services for both Jetstar and Qantaslink. Given the number of services operating, maximum seat capacity into the destination is 655,000. For the Year Ended June 2009 the airport received 434,305 passengers, ranking it amongst the top 20 busiest domestic airports in Australia.

Skystar Airport Services employs 21 staff, two full time, two permanent part time and up to 17 casuals, to cover requirements such as airport safety, management, general administration, ticketing and seat allocation, boarding, ground and baggage handling, food and beverage and cleaning.

1. Risk Management

The Airport has a Risk Management Plan that forms part of its Business Plan. These plans are developed and delivered through the parent company Mondaldehyous and the risk management components is regularly reviewed and revised to ensure it meets current safety standards and requirements.

2. Cyclone Warnings

The airport had several days' notice that Cyclone Ului was looming off the coast. Once he was aware of its existence, the airport's Skystar Airport Area Manager John Wallace tracked Ului's path via various weather monitoring websites. He also contacted Perth headquarters and began to map out his strategy with them. He had been through this before. Only 12 months earlier a cyclone had threatened the Whitsundays coastline but in that case, it fizzled out to a rain depression. John knew the drill and was clear on what needed to be done. He continued to monitor the weather sites and talk to the airline pilots as well as the skippers running the local ferry service. Then, on the preceding Thursday when it was confirmed that Ului





would cross the coast at Airlie Beach sometime on Saturday or Sunday, he put his plan into action.

3. Preparations

In the case of Great Barrier Reef Airport, all staff members live on the mainland and commute daily to the island by ferry. In every respect the triggers for what needed to happen and when were governed by the actions of the ferry company, Fantasea Adventure Cruising. When it stopped operating, so did the airport. This happened on the Friday and John called the airlines to let them know the position and confirm that they would be cancelling their respective flights. He then called his staff and placed them on standby for Sunday operations.

As a major island resort, it was a relatively easy process to inform guests of the situation and to provide accommodation, for the duration. All airline reservations were re-booked directly between the guests and Jetstar or Qantas Link, as the airport staff including John, were stuck on the mainland and had no hope of handling this aspect. John was in constant touch with Whitsundays Coast Airport and assisting in the negotiations with Jetstar regarding its Saturday afternoon air service. Once again, the Jetstar's not to fly in to Proserpine was dictated to by outside factors. Weather conditions in Mackay began to deteriorate well before Ului hit Airlie Beach. At 2:30 on Saturday afternoon Mackay Air Traffic Control closed down its operations, making it impossible for any aircraft to fly in or out of the region. Concerned about the late notice of the shut down in the late afternoon John went to the airport to make sure he could tell people of the situation and at 6:00pm, the normal departure time that last flight, he left a sign on the door and went home to make his own arrangements to ride out the storm with his family.

At home, John and his family and friends had dinner and watched the television for the latest news on the storm's progress. At 11:30 they lost power. The windows had been taped and all the other necessary precautions had been taken so the only thing to do was to wait it out. With torches and a battery radio they went off to bed.

4. The Impact

On Sunday morning John got a full report on what had happened at Great Barrier Reef Airport. Much to his relief things were good. There had been debris on the landing strip, which was already in the process of being cleared away. A pair of garage doors had been damaged and some roof iron sheeting had blown off. Apart from these minor issues the terminal was in excellent working condition.

Nevertheless, Fantasea advised John that its ferry services would not start until the Monday and in turn, John let the staff on standby know the situation. On Monday morning when they arrived at the airport everything was ready to go. They simply untied and unpacked the equipment and opened for business. The mainland was blacked out but Hamilton Island had its own power source, which meant John and his team were at once, fully operational.

5. Lessons Learned

For John, the entire event brought home how his planning rested with the actions of others such as the ferry service and Mackay Air Traffic Control. This was the most critical factor John had to deal with throughout the ordeal.



His biggest asset was his mobile phone. In the days leading up to Ului and the 36 hours after, John made a huge number of calls. No matter where people were, he could reach them and keep them updated. That level of communication made his job much easier.

In the debriefing sessions that followed, there was strong consensus that the team worked well together and managed the crisis as well as could be expected. There were minor differences in opinion concerning procedures around Jetstar's Saturday afternoon flight and when it should have been cancelled. However, in John's view this was minor and given the context, was simply a case of people trying to work towards getting the best solution.