

# 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.**

## Whitsunday Coast airport

[www.whitsunday.qld.gov.au](http://www.whitsunday.qld.gov.au)

Whitsunday Coast Airport is the mainland gateway to the Whitsundays. Located 12 kilometres south of Proserpine, the airport is an easy 25-minute drive from Airlie Beach. Operations are set up to service domestic carriers Virgin Blue and Jetstar, both of which run daily domestic flights on direct routes from Brisbane to the Whitsundays.

Airport facilities include charter flights and light aircraft parking and airside tenancy, hire car and transfer services agencies including Hertz, Europcar, Avis, bus, coach, taxi and limousine services, and a Whitsundays reservations and tours booking centre. The terminal has a fully licensed cafe, bar and kiosk and Automatic Teller Machine facilities.

First established in the late 1940s as an airfield, the ensuing years has seen the site transform into a small and highly functional regional airport. For the past three years, Daryl Greenham has been Airport Operations Manager working with a small team of two full time employees.

### 1. Risk Management

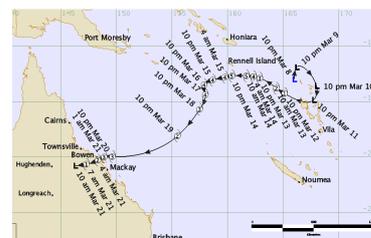
Daryl reflected that Tropical Cyclone Ului was a wake up call. At the time of Cyclone Ului the airport had comprehensive safety plans in place but procedures for managing a cyclonic event were not included. In an effort to quickly address the oversight, Daryl contacted other Queensland regional airports for assistance, namely Townsville, Mackay and Maroochydore. Based on the Cyclone Plans they provided, Daryl was able to develop a Cyclone Plan of his own, suited to Whitsunday Coast Airport conditions.

### 2. Cyclone Warnings

The airport began to receive Bureau of Meteorology (BOM) weather alerts seven days prior to Cyclone Ului making landfall.

As Daryl tracked the cyclone's progress, he referred to the instructions laid out in the new Plan and was able to implement procedures in accordance with the information he received through BOM updates.

The step-by-step nature of the plan made decision making easier and gave him the necessary building blocks to work with. The plan, together with the alerts, also helped to Daryl with two critical decisions - at what point he should impose restricted landing conditions and when he would need to close the airport.



### 3. Preparations

As noted, once the cyclone warnings began, Daryl's most pressing job was to get his planning and preparations in order. With the help of staff members and colleagues from other regional airports he was able to quickly develop an appropriate response plan.

Darryl's next priority was to maintain regular communications with all the parties connected to airport operations and to work through any actions required during the vital preparation phase. This included talking with baggage handlers and other ground crews to ensure all equipment would be properly secured. Cones, markers, gables and signage also had to be checked and made secure. Café staff, taxi companies, limousine and coach services were briefed on possible changes should flights be delayed or cancelled. At the critical stage, when Ului was within the 200 kilometre range, these communications intensified and widened to include the airlines.

Whitsunday Coast Airport takes two flights per day, one each from Jetstar and Virgin Blue. The flights are scheduled to arrive in the afternoon. On Saturday morning, Ului was bearing down on the Queensland coast and predicted to hit Airlie Beach sometime that evening. Virgin Blue cancelled its service for the day, however, Jetstar remained undecided. The company was waiting on further information about the cyclone's intended path. Everyone associated with the airport was put on standby. Daryl felt it was important to let the airline make the decision to fly or not but worked towards negotiating the cancellation. He was also mindful that those he had placed on standby had homes and families and needed to make their own cyclone preparations. By 1:30pm all flights to Hamilton were cancelled due to the fact that airline staff, who share their time between Whitsunday Coast and Great Barrier Reef airports, were unable to reach the island because ferry services had been shut down. Jetstar was still keen to run its scheduled service into Proserpine and held out for another two hours. Finally, at 3:30pm the airline made its decision and cancelled the flight. At this point, Daryl immediately notified all passenger transport and terminal services on standby that they would no longer be required.

### 4. The Impact

The airport came through the storm relatively unscathed and was operational by Sunday afternoon. There was a lot of water inside the terminal and the airport's cleaning contractors were called in to mop up. The high winds had knocked over trees in the car park and on along the road and destroyed some fences. One hangar was completely destroyed, two cones makers were missing and a whirlybird had been ripped from the roof of one building. Overall, Daryl felt he was fortunate.

With two generators onsite, power was quickly restored. The main concern then became whether the road leading into the airport would remain open. The airport road is susceptible to flooding in some low-lying areas. The heavy rain associated with the cyclone was a further risk. On occasions during or after a heavy deluge Daryl has had to divert flights away from his airport due to road conditions. However, water can also quickly dissipate and Daryl found it tricky to know whether he should risk reopening the airport or send air traffic elsewhere.

Daryl also fielded many calls from the public wanting updates on whether the airport was open and if flights were expected to get in and out of Airlie.

### 5. Lessons Learned

While the damage to the airport was minimal, Daryl felt he learned a lot from the ordeal. He valued the help of staff and colleagues who provided him with their Cyclone Plans and the community spirit of locals who were quickly on the scene with chainsaws and other equipment to clear fallen trees and debris. Their efforts not only sped up the recovery time but helped emergency services who were already over stretched with demands. In particular, Daryl learned:

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1. The value of having a Cyclone Plan.
  2. The importance of communication and keeping people informed. This also helped to get people on board with tasks and built a strong feeling of cooperation between Daryl and his staff as well as colleagues and outside associates.
  3. How much time and commitment is involved in supporting regulatory bodies, air services and other services providers with information and advice.

**The need to better utilise technology to instantly inform and update people i.e. bulk broadcasting through SMS.**