

# The 1972 'Papa India' air disaster: what have we learned about supporting first responders dealing with trauma?



*Fifty years after a major fatal plane crash on British soil, [Melanie Henwood](#) offers some personal reflections and asks what we have learned about supporting first responders dealing with trauma.*

Barely a day passes without news of an accident or terrorist incident causing fatalities and major loss of life. From the recent mass shooting and murder of multiple schoolchildren in the US, to a car being deliberately driven into a crowd in Berlin. There are also frequent anniversaries of major incidents: the terrorist attack at Fishmongers' Hall on 29 November 2019; the 2017 Manchester Arena bombing; the 2017 London Bridge and Borough Market terrorist attacks; the Grenfell Tower fire on 14 June 2017; the 7 July terrorist bombings in London in 2005, and numerous other tragedies. For people involved in such events, each anniversary risks re-traumatizing and revisiting unresolved issues and grief.

As a nation, we have hopefully improved the way we respond to large-scale loss of life, whether the result of terrorism, accidents, or natural disaster. People share their reflections and memories; those directly affected are more likely to be offered counselling or psychotherapeutic interventions, and opportunities to process experiences. The last two years have brought new collective trauma with the impact of the pandemic and so much loss of life. It remains to be seen whether the UK COVID-19 Inquiry into the country's preparedness and response to the pandemic will provide a focus for the population to commemorate loss and grieve.

Past events were not always treated with the same dignity or compassion. The dominant response was instead the 'stiff upper lip' and carrying on as normal, with few if any memorials, and no opportunity to share stories or reflect on events. On 18 June 2022, it will be 50 years since British European Airways trident Flight 548 G-ARPI (known by its phonetic call sign as 'Papa India') took off from Heathrow airport for Brussels just after 5pm and entered a catastrophic stall two minutes into the flight. It crashed just outside of Staines, killing all 118 people on board. It remains the largest civil aviation loss of life in British airspace (with the exception of the terrorist destruction of Pan Am Flight 103 over Lockerbie on 21 December 1988).

In 1972 my father, Terry Henwood, was in the Metropolitan Police, stationed at Feltham, not far from Heathrow, and was on duty and on his own in a squad car when the first call came in. The radio operator reported that a member of the public 'had seen a plane coming down'. No one took it very seriously at first because there had been no Mayday call from the flight and no emergency reports from Heathrow. The expectation was that it would be 'someone flying a model aircraft'. Dad was nearest to the area just off the A30 Staines by-pass and offered to take a look. As he climbed over an embankment, he could not believe what he saw: the wreck of the trident strewn in front of him, the huge tail piece broken off and standing upright. The smell of aviation fuel was overwhelming (although astonishingly, the plane had not caught fire on impact), and the eerie silence – no screams, no calls for help. After alerting emergency services, Dad headed into the fuselage despite the obvious danger, trying to find anyone alive; there were just two – a man who Dad pulled from the wreckage and a young child. Both subsequently died. He was at the site for several hours, surrounded by debris and confusion, knowing almost from the start that all the efforts of the emergency crews were futile – this was solely a recovery operation with no hope of rescue of survivors.

Few people – outside of aviation circles – know about the crash today. News reporting was different in those pre-internet days, but so too was the response to a major incident of this nature. There was no obvious support for the emergency responders; no talk of PTSD, or HR help in dealing with the awful sights of the crash scene.

I remember Dad coming home late that Sunday night; the look of shock on his face when he came through the door and saying nothing about what he had been doing. He was back on duty as normal the following day, no rest day or recovery period, and no debriefing or offer of support or counselling. He rarely mentioned the crash or what he witnessed. He became an extremely nervous aircraft passenger and was never happier than when the plane landed safely; in retrospect, it is obvious that his anxiety about flying was related to the Trident crash. Many years later, he was interviewed for a television documentary about the crash and for the first time gave a detailed account of what he had seen, and it was clear how much it affected him and that he still got flashbacks. Dad died eight years ago and at his funeral one of his former police colleagues who had also been at the crash site talked about his role and all he had done; it was the first that many of his friends and neighbours knew about his involvement with the plane crash. Those who knew him well were amazed he had never shared his experience with them.

It took until 2004 before the Trident accident was commemorated in any way with the construction of a memorial garden close to the crash area and a [specially commissioned window](#) installed in the local church (with the inscription 'their going from us to be their destruction; but they are at peace'). A Memorial service takes place on the accident anniversary, and the attendance of surviving bereaved family members (many from Belgium), [representatives from air cabin crew](#) who probably weren't born when the accident happened, and members of the emergency services, still speaks volumes of unresolved grief and trauma. It is a profoundly moving event.

We are now more used to hearing about PTSD and the impact of trauma on people caught up in, or witness to, shocking events, but it is easy to overlook that this includes the first responders – the emergency services who go *towards danger*, 'up the stairs; into the fire', or into volatile situations, and who see everything. There has been significant development of emergency response logistics and protocols since the 1970s; not just in the Gold Command system for managing major incidents and disasters, but also in the support for those closely involved. But for blue light employees, things may not have changed all that much. As with the armed forces, the culture in the police and other emergency services has often been one of bravado and machismo; people cope by getting on with things as normal, but the steady accumulation of exposure to trauma and terror comes at a major cost to wellbeing.

In 2015, Mind, the mental health charity, established the [Blue Light Together](#) programme to tackle the stigma and discrimination associated with mental health and to support emergency services employees and volunteers develop their own mental health resilience. Despite this, Mind [reported](#) in 2016 that one in four emergency services workers had considered suicide because of the stress and poor mental health they experienced in their work. Findings from 2021 indicate that almost 70% of emergency responders believed their mental health declined during the pandemic. People working in emergency services are *more* likely than the general public to experience mental health problems, but *less* likely to seek help.

Fifty years after the Papa India crash devastated lives, it is still a vivid memory for those who dealt with the immediate aftermath and have lived with it. Similar experiences and impacts have no doubt been experienced around every major incident before and since. We owe it to each other and to our blue light colleagues to give more attention to mental health needs arising from trauma at work, whatever the cause and whether recent or in the distant past. Every incident casts a long shadow; it is time to let in the light.

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## About the Author



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