

# CISM and the Recovery of the Space Shuttle Columbia

By Vaughn Donaldson, BCETS

The explosion, disintegration and recovery of the space shuttle Columbia became one of the largest CISM responses in Texas history. Within three days of the crash, Jackie Reese, head of NASA's EAP contacted the ICISF for CISM assistance for NASA. This initial request was for CISM support in East Texas and Louisiana while NASA worked to recover the remains of the astronauts and spacecraft.

Don Howell, ICISF Executive Director, gave Jackie the names and numbers of three Texas resources including the Texas CISM Network, Southeast Texas CISM team, and me, the ICISF regional liaison. As ICISF liaison for Region VI (Texas, New Mexico, Oklahoma, Louisiana, Arkansas, Missouri and Kansas), I contacted Jackie to see if she needed any additional resources. Jackie informed me that she had talked to so many people wanting to help but wasn't sure if she had been contacted by Texas CISM Network or the local team, so yes, she would certainly appreciate any help I could offer regarding local resources. I immediately started contacting the local CISM teams.

NASA's EAP had very specific instructions about the CISM response in East Texas. All that was needed was peer support for NASA employees including astronauts, security, contractors and other support personnel. There would be no group interventions, only individual interventions when needed. I was relieved when informed that we wouldn't actually have to use astronauts as peer support for astronauts, but law enforcement or firefighters would be

just fine. The main requirement was that whoever responded had to promise no "touchy feely" tactics and no interference with ongoing operations.

## **Background Information:**

- ?? The wreckage was spread over 2400 square miles.
- ?? Over 130 federal, state and local agencies were involved in the mission.
- ?? More than 30,000 people were involved
- ?? 700,000 acres were searched on foot
- ?? 1.6 million acres were searched with aircraft
- ?? The Civic Center in Lufkin, Texas, served as the Disaster Field Office with base camps located at Nacogdoches, Palestine, Corsicana, and Hemphill, Texas. Searchers staged at the base camps prior to, and returning from, searching for wreckage.

NASA requested that we send teams of two to the Command Post (CP) to be briefed by the NASA Incident Commander. Then the teams would deploy to whichever site needed our services the most.

Usually this would be the site where the remains of astronauts were being recovered. This on-scene support continued from February 6 until March 10th. On March 15th, the Texas State Crisis Consortium took over CISM operations.

During this time, several hundred contacts were made, usually when the searchers deployed to, or returned from a day of searching. Most contacts were very brief because those being assisted only wanted someone to listen. Although

NASA was the agency requesting our help, we were there for whomever needed us, and many if not most of the interventions were for other agencies.

Several times during the month, we were asked to provide peer support at Barksdale Air Force Base in Louisiana. While our Louisiana CISM teams made several attempts to provide that support, each time they were turned away due to a lack of communication between the Incident Commander and command staff at Kennedy Space Center and Johnson Space Center.

## **Discussion**

Sometimes the best peer support or crisis intervention is to "take out the trash, make a pot of coffee, or wash the dishes." At times, we mistakenly believe that crisis intervention always requires sitting down and letting someone have this enormous, cathartic moment. While that has its place, it certainly is not the be-all, end-all, of crisis intervention. We, as crisis interveners, need to be willing to help with menial tasks such as taking out the trash, washing dishes or whatever it takes to help those who are in operational mode. This willingness to humble ourselves actually serves several purposes. First, we're doing something that constructively helps the operation. Second, it helps build rapport and trust. This makes it easier for on-scene workers to open up and talk about the crisis and how they are coping with it. Last it gives us something to keep us busy. A disaster spread out over hundreds of miles has no room for anyone who

*Continued on page 16*

## A Learning Experience

(continued from page 15)

We've learned a lot of internal lessons (e.g., the importance of being able to quickly process government travel authorizations and put contractual arrangements in place; the need to increase our team numbers so we have coverage in all EPA regions; the importance of making stress management issues integral parts of all health and safety considerations; the need for ongoing national education on the purpose of the team, etc.). We've also learned a number of external lessons, probably the most important of which is the need to coordinate with other federal responding agencies. That need now is being addressed by the federal Interagency Safety and Health Coordinating Committee.

How do we sum up our experience?

Overall, we've concluded that it was a good first deployment. We've gotten

enough positive feedback from the EPA shuttle responders that we can feel we definitely provided a needed and useful service. Our new team got some valuable field experience and the opportunity to test itself. We've made some steps forward in gaining more acceptance and credibility among the population we serve. We've also identified numerous areas in need of improvement. What more can any new team ask from its first time out?

*fan Shubert, LCSW, works in the Office of Emergency Prevention, Preparedness, and Response at the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and is the Clinical Director of EPA's Emergency Response Peer Support and C/SM Team. She also is approved to teach ICISFs CISM: Individual Crisis Intervention & Peer Support course.*

## Out and About

Below is a tentative schedule\* of industry conferences and trade shows where ICISF will be exhibiting "in the coming months. If you'll be attending one of these shows, be sure to stop by and say hi!

### April 2-4, 2004

2004 ACA Annual Convention  
Kansas City, MO

### April 14-18, 2004

ATSS 12th Annual Conference on  
Traumatic Stress -  
Vancouver, BC, Canada

### April 18-20, 2004

National Disaster Medical System  
2004 Conference- Dallas, TX

### April 24-28, 2004

Association of Professional  
Chaplains Annual Conference-  
Dallas, TX

### April 25-27, 2004

NASW-NJ 2004 Annual  
Conference- Atlantic City, NJ

### April 29-May 2, 2004

CAMFT 40th Annual Conference-  
Los Angeles, CA

### May 12-15, 2004

Family Support America's 10th  
Biennial National Conference-  
Chicago, IL

Continued on page 17

---

## CISM and the Recovery of the Space Shuttle Columbia

(continued from page 7)

just came to sit and talk. Working as a team with the responders allows us to provide better peer support and crisis intervention, which is always our goal.

### Acknowledgments

No discussion about the CISM response to the shuttle disaster would be complete without acknowledging the groups who helped make this operation a success. Some of the groups helping in this endeavor include: The City of College Station, Dallas Fire Department, Arlington Police Department, Fort Worth Fire Department, Fort Worth ISD, Tarrant County Crisis Response, Lone Star CISM Team, the Texas State Crisis Consortium, Texas Dept. of MHMR, DPS Victims Assistance, Texas CISM Network, Bluebonnet CISM Team, Southeast Texas

CISM Team, South Channel Bay Area CISM Team, Louisiana CISM, Permian Basin CISM Team and Midland Fire Dept.

*Vaughn Donaldson, BCETS, is a District Chief with the Midland Fire Department and a Licensed Paramedic who has worked in Emergency Medical Services since 1981. He serves as Coordinator of the Midland Fire Department CISM Team, President of the Permian Basin CISM Team and is an IC/SF approved instructor for the CISM: Group Crisis Intervention; CISM: Advanced Group Crisis Intervention; and CISM: Individual Crisis Intervention & Peer Support programs.*