

Unit Introduction

Despite our best efforts, bad things can and do happen. A plane crashes, a tank inadvertently fires a round off range and destroys a civilian building, or a ship collides with a pier. The adrenalin is pumping. You, the PAO, are being tugged in a thousand directions. Your people want you to tell them what they should be doing. The media are clamoring for answers. And the boss is seeking your advice – right now!

As a PAO, you will be smack in the middle of all this chaos. While being a PAO can be challenging during the best of times, it is often during times of crisis that your career and reputation are defined. This unit will focus on your role during an accident/incident and provide you guidance that will help you weather the storm.

Unit Objective

- Write an initial accident media release

Unit Overview

- Maximum disclosure, minimum delay
- Possible information sources
- Structure of the accident story
- What is releasable?
- Proper attribution

Maximum disclosure, minimum delay

What does this really mean? Do we give out all information immediately? What about security, accuracy, policy and propriety considerations? What about the individual's right to privacy and the family's right to privacy?

- We must acknowledge that an accident or incident has occurred.
- The time standard for getting out the first release after an accident is ONE HOUR after the first notification.
- On military installations, names of the dead and injured in an accident cannot be released until 24 hours after the next of kin have been notified.
- We must provide accurate information.
- We must not interpret or speculate about the cause of an accident until it is known and made public by an investigation board. Sometimes, that can take several weeks or even longer.
- You must attribute information when required.

Sources

As a PAO, you must know where to get the necessary information for your release. Get to know the people who will play a role in most accidents or incident, and don't wait until you are in the midst of a situation to figure out who they are. At a minimum, develop a professional relationship with the following people before you find yourself in the midst of an incident or accident:

- Provost marshal
- Personnel officer
- Hospital commander
- Fire chief
- Safety officer
- Command post personnel

In the initial accident release, do not use the names of your sources, only their titles and organizations (said the base fire chief, said the hospital commander). By not using names in the initial release, you reduce the possibility of the media going directly to your source for additional information.

Structure: the lead

As in any hard news external release, use a summary lead with a dateline.

The lead emphasis in an initial accident story is more controlled, depending on whether there are deaths, injuries, property damage or a combination to be dealt with.

If there are deaths, they must be the lead emphasis. Use the impersonal who for all people or groups. (If there is more than one death, job titles and units may need to be less specific than usual.)

Example:

FORT GEORGE G. MEADE, Md. -- Two students at the Defense Information School here were killed at 2:30 p.m. today when their car ran off Mapes Road near the post exchange and struck a utility pole.

Structure: the lead

If there are deaths and injuries, deaths take precedence and shall be listed first. Go with general descriptions if details are not available or if complete impersonal who information would be too lengthy.

Example:

FORT GEORGE G. MEADE, Md. -- One post soldier was killed and eight other people were injured when they were struck by lightning today while at a rugby match on a post recreation field.

Structure: the lead

If there are no deaths, injuries are the lead emphasis.

Example:

FORT GEORGE G. MEADE, Md. -- Two students at the Defense Information School here were injured at 2:34 p.m. today when their car ran off Mapes Road near the post exchange and struck a utility pole.

Structure: the lead

If there are no deaths and injuries, the What or property damage will most likely be the lead emphasis. If available, use dollar amounts given by appropriate sources. Know the difference between "damage" and "damages" (see your stylebook!).

Example:

FORT GEORGE G. MEADE, Md. -- A fire caused an estimated \$500,000 in damage when it swept through the west wing of the Defense Information School here today.

Structure: the bridge

If next of kin notification has not been completed and 24 hours after notification have not yet passed, the bridge will read:

The names of the dead and injured will be withheld until 24 hours after the families of the victims have been notified.

This statement will be used unless ALL appropriate next of kin have been notified.

Structure: the body

The body of an initial accident story offers all information that does not violate SAPP or an individual's privacy.

If there are dead, all releasable information on the dead is provided first. For each death, begin a new paragraph.

Releasable info for the dead includes:

- number of dead
- how they died (what happened)
- where they died
- what they died of (not *from* -- death isn't a gift!)

NOT releasable info for the dead includes:

- sex
- age
- home address/phone number
- social security number
- marital status/dependants
- race

Refer to the Guidelines for Release unit of instruction for more guidance on what is and is not releasable.

Structure: the body

Information on the injured should follow information on deaths, if there are any. For each injury, begin a new paragraph.

Releasable info for the injured includes:

- number of injured
- what the last reported status/condition was (stable, serious, good, etc.)
 - *Always use past tense for verb (was, were), as conditions change frequently.*
- where they are
- how they got there (military ambulance, etc.)

NOT releasable info for the injured includes:

- sex
- age
- home address/phone number
- social security number
- marital status/dependants
- race
- specifics of injuries

Refer to the Guidelines for Release unit of instruction for more guidance on what is and is not releasable.

Structure: the body

After releasable information on deaths and injuries, provide all remaining releasable information about the accident itself.

The very last paragraph in an initial accident story should be the investigation statement:

The cause of the accident is under investigation.

This sentence is designed to answer why we won't speculate on the why.

Reminders

Initial accident stories are chock-full of vital information. Review the rules of attribution and apply as appropriate. Remember: when in doubt, attribute!

Much of the information available for an initial accident release is sensitive. Be sure to apply appropriate release guidelines to determine what is and is not releasable.

Format your initial accident release as you learned to do for all external releases.

Unit Summary

During stressful times, a PAO must be able to handle multiple issues. This formulaic approach to the initial accident story is designed to allow you to better focus your efforts and energy. It will also help you better advise your commander when bad things happen.