

Three killed, two injured in tragic helicopter accident

Although technology has made antarctic operations safer and more efficient, the possibility of sudden, unexpected tragedy continues to confront those who choose to work on the southernmost continent. In October the deaths of a U.S. Naval air crewman and two members of the New Zealand Antarctic Program reminded personnel working on Ross Island that life-threatening dangers remain a part of life in Antarctica's hostile environment. Severe weather conditions are believed to have contributed to the crash.

In the early evening of 13 October, a U.S. Navy HH-1N helicopter (a newer version of the UH-1N helicopter usually flown in support of the U.S. Antarctic Program) was returning to McMurdo Station after a routine flight to Cape Bird, about 40 kilometers from the station. At 6:25 p.m. (McMurdo local time) Navy air operations reported that the helicopter was 10 minutes behind its anticipated arrival time. Attempts were made immediately, but unsuccessfully, to contact the helicopter via radio.

In the McMurdo Station area, weather conditions had begun to deteriorate, with snow and surges of blowing snow causing visibility to vary drastically from between 0.8 to 48 kilometers. Under these conditions, all hoped that the helicopter had landed and the three crewmen and two passengers were safely waiting for better flying conditions.

On board were the pilot, Lt. Cmdr. Ed Crews, his co-pilot, Lt. John Seralles, air crewman Ben Micou, and two passengers, New Zealanders Garth Varcoe and Terry Newport. As part of an agreement between the U.S. and New Zealand antarctic programs to exchange support, the helicopter had flown earlier that day to Cape

Bird to pick up Messrs. Varcoe and Newport, who had been at the site on the northern coast of Ross Island for 5 days to prepare a New Zealand summer camp for the research season.

At 7:45 pm another Navy helicopter left McMurdo Station to begin searching for the missing aircraft. At the same time, one of the U.S. Antarctic Program ski-equipped Hercules airplanes (LC-130) was diverted from a flight to Christchurch to aid in the search along the west coast of Ross Island and over ice-covered McMurdo Sound.

By 9:15 pm with the missing helicopter now 3 hours overdue, senior managers at McMurdo Station notified the U.S./New Zealand Joint Antarctic Search and Rescue Team (JASRT) and requested that they begin an overland search. With the LC-130 serving as a communications link between them and McMurdo Station, eight team members—six aboard a *Haaglund* and two on a *Sprite*—left McMurdo Station for Cape Royds, following the anticipated flight line of the missing helicopter. Additional search-and-rescue (SAR) personnel and medical personnel took off aboard a second helicopter to assist in the search by air, despite the continuing poor weather along the search path.

Shortly before midnight, the crew aboard the second helicopter reported to McMurdo Station that they had made radio contact with LCDR Crews, who told the crew that they were near Cape Royds at approximately 77°27' S 166°27' E. Although poor visibility at the crash site prevented this helicopter from landing, about 15 minutes after midnight the first rescue helicopter launched from McMurdo was able to land; the first helicopter began moving SAR personnel from nearby Horse-shoe Bay (77°32' S 166°12' E) to the crash site.

The SAR teams found that besides LCDR Crews, Lt. Seralles was alive but injured. Both New Zealanders were dead, and the Navy crewman Micou was missing. LCDR Crews and Lt. Seralles, whose legs were broken, were suffering from hypothermia. Each of them was moved to a helicopter and quickly re-



NSF photo by Russ Kinne.

By using UH-1N helicopters, the U.S. Antarctic Program (USAP) is able to support researchers in the Ross Island area and in southern Victoria Land. During the two decades that these helicopters have supported USAP scientists, the aircraft has had a good safety record. Although the United States has used helicopters in Antarctica since 1946, until October 1992 there had not been a fatal helicopter accident in Antarctica since 1969.

turned to McMurdo Station for medical treatment.

Six SAR team members and one of the two helicopters, which had returned to Cape Royds after taking one of the injured back to the station, continued the search for the missing crewman. At 2:10 am, the search was suspended as darkness and snow blown by 20- to 40-knot winds reduced visibility to about 50 meters. About 2 hours later, weather conditions improved and the search continued. Shortly after resuming their search, the ground team reported to McMurdo that they had found the body of the missing crewman near the crash site, and he too was dead.

Although weather conditions near McMurdo Station were good enough for the LC-130 to take off for New Zealand with the injured pilot and co-pilot, the weather at Cape Royds continued to deteriorate, preventing the Navy helicopters from retrieving the three bodies and the ground team. Finally, on 15 October, the weather improved enough for the team to return with the bodies to McMurdo Station. The bodies were transported to Christchurch on 16 October.

A 15-year antarctic veteran, Garth Varcoe (age 48) was the Technical Services Officer for the New Zealand Antarctic Program (NZAP) based in Christchurch. He had been a full-time staff member of NZAP since 1977. He is survived by his wife and three children. Thirty-one-year-old Terry Newport was a carpenter from Christchurch and had arrived in Antarctica for the first time during the winter-fly-in in late August 1992. He is survived by his wife. Ben Micou, 14-year veteran of the U.S. Navy, was serving his third antarctic season with the Antarctic Development Squadron Six.

In condolences conveyed to the New Zealand government, Dr. Walter Massey, Director of the National Science Foundation said: "While technology has made our operations in Antarctica safer, it has not eliminated the risks. And, those individuals who chose to work in the Antarctic embody the highest standards of courage, dedication, and cooperation."

Memorial services were held for all three at the International Antarctic Center near the Christchurch Airport on 19 and 20 October. At the same time, services were also held in Antarctica at Scott Base, the New Zealand Station on Ross Island, for the New Zealanders (19 October) and at McMurdo Station for Micou (20 October).

At times, the rugged terrain and rapidly changing weather conditions in Antarctica make aircraft operations difficult and risky. Between 1946 and 1992, 55 people (including those in this helicopter accident) died in Antarctica while working with the U.S. program. Of these deaths, 35 resulted from aircraft accidents; but before this year, only three of these people died in helicopter accidents.

Helicopters were first used in Antarc-