Human error in 3 crashes

Border Patrol helicopters: low fuel, jacket near rotor

By Michael Marizco
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Border Patrol pilots and mechanics in the Tucson Sector have been at least partly to blame for two helicopter crashes within a one-year period, including one in which the pilot failed to keep enough fuel in the aircraft, federal reports show.

And in the agency's most recent helicopter crash last month, federal investigators found a shredded Border Patrol flight jacket near the tail rotor - both three-quarters of a mile away from the rest of the helicopter. Border Patrol pilots were injured in three crashes, including one in 2000.

In that recent crash, a Border Patrol helicopter flying a regular patrol crashed May 12 southwest of Tucson, near Three Points. According to a National Transportation Safety Board report, the pilot reported hearing a loud bang before losing control of the chopper and falling 300 feet. The onboard observer, also a pilot, was seriously injured.

The jacket was found in the vicinity of the tail rotor blade and the gearbox, said NTSB air safety investigator Patrick Jones. "The jacket also had red- and white-colored paint transfers. The tail rotor blades on the accident helicopter reportedly were painted with red- and white-colored paint," the NTSB report stated. The report is preliminary and can be changed as new information arises.

Frank Amarillas, Border Patrol spokesman for the Tucson Sector, declined to answer any questions about the crashes. The total number of crashes of Border Patrol aircraft could not be obtained Friday.

The Tucson Sector of the Border Patrol also would not identify the pilots involved in last month's crash, nor would officials provide information about their flight experience or training, citing the privacy of the agents involved. The Arizona Daily Star requested the information from the Department of Homeland Security under the federal Freedom of Information Act last month.

Erika Knasiak, Freedom of Information and Privacy Act officer for the Western Region of the Department of Homeland Security, said the names of the pilots will not be released, though their flight experience might be.
"We don't want agents' names floating around out there," she said.

"It's hard to imagine what the national security reasons are for not releasing the names of the pilots," said Lucy Dalglish, executive director of the Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press in Washington, D.C.

Such information, she said, is important for public oversight, and she noted that military and commercial airlines publicly identify pilots involved in crashes.

**In an April 2000 crash,** Border Patrol mechanics failed to install a cotter pin after working on the chopper; the cyclic control fell off in midflight and the helicopter crashed in the Green Valley area, the NTSB reported. That pilot received minor injuries. A cyclic control controls the forward, reverse, and sideways motion of a helicopter.

Border Patrol mechanics had forgotten to secure a nut with a cotter pin to hold it in place after they rebuilt the swashplate assembly on the helicopter. A swashplate assembly is used to change the pitch of the rotor system and helps control the direction of the chopper.

While flying at about 20 feet, looking for the footprints of illegal entrants, the pilot felt a vibration and the chopper fell, crashing in the desert.

"This maintenance-oversight-related failure resulted in the pilot's complete loss of cyclic control," said the NTSB report.

Retired Border Patrol agent Mike Albon was the pilot of that helicopter. It was his only accident in 22 years, he said.

"I was a very lucky boy," Albon said. He also is the spokesman for the National Border Patrol Council, Local 2544, the local agents union.

Border Patrol pilots are under pressure to fly safely, but also must aid in capturing illegal entrants or in helping people who need assistance, he said.

"In my case, it was pretty darned lucky that I was pretty low to the ground at the time it happened. I cut down a few mesquite trees in the process," he said.

**In June 1999,** a Border Patrol helicopter crashed at Tucson International Airport because the pilot neglected to calculate the amount of fuel he had for staying in the air, according to an NTSB finding.

In that crash, the pilot had not properly calculated how much fuel he had left and the chopper was flying with "known deficiencies," the NTSB reported.

The agency stated in its online report that the probable cause for the crash of the chopper was "fuel exhaustion resulting from pilot's failure to perform adequate fuel consumption calculations. The unreliable and inoperative fuel level indicating system components and the operator's operation of the aircraft with known deficiencies were factors in the accident."

As he was crashing, the pilot guided his helicopter away from buildings and cars. He was seriously injured.

The pilot was flying a helicopter whose fuel gauges were not working properly and he forgot
to keep measure of the amount of fuel he had left while in the air, the NTSB reported.

"He was not observing his known fuel, he was not watching his clock and he was not watching his fuel gauge," said helicopter veteran Jim McPhail.

Even with a fuel gauge that doesn't work correctly, a pilot still should be able to estimate how much fuel he has left based on the amount of time the helicopter’s engines have operated. An OH-6A, the model of copter involved in all three crashes, burns about 30 gallons per hour.

"It looks like somebody got out there and didn’t punch the clock or didn’t look at his wristwatch or just wasn’t paying attention," McPhail said.

The pilot flew for about six hours and refueled twice in that time. But he had not written down his estimated amount of fuel in his log after his last refueling. Six hours of flight time can wear on a pilot, particularly in the hot, bright desert, McPhail said.

The basic requirements for a person to become a Border Patrol pilot are three years as an agent, a minimum commercial pilot’s certificate with airplane single-engine land and instrument airplane ratings, and a first-class medical certificate, said Mario Villarreal, spokesman for the Bureau of Customs and Border Protection in Washington, D.C.

In addition, pilots must have a minimum of 1,500 total flight hours, including 250 in-command hours, 150 instrument/night hours, and 100 hours within the last 12 months. Pilots must also pass a 30-day evaluation, including written tests, Villarreal said.

"Our Border Patrol pilots are a critical and vital asset in securing our borders. Not only do they provide 24-hour-a-day, seven-days-a-week aerial support to our agents on the ground, but they also play an integral role in our search and rescue efforts," Villarreal said. He noted that Border Patrol pilots log a total of about 42,000 hours annually.

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