

Seattle Chopper Crash Probe Looks For Anomalies

News

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SEATTLE (AP) -- The challenge of determining what caused a fatal helicopter crash near the Space Needle that killed two men on board and burned a third on the ground is complicated by the fire that charred much of the wreckage, a federal investigator says.



A large portion of the helicopter, which was built in 2003, was made of composite material that burned, so "a lot of those parts and pieces are simply gone," Dennis Hogenson, with the National Safety Transportation Board, told a Wednesday news conference.

Still, investigators plan to reconstruct the wreckage they recovered from a busy intersection and moved a secured hangar in Auburn, about 30 miles south of Seattle.

"I'm confident that we're going to figure this out," Hogenson said.

Investigators are reviewing a number of scenarios, including examining what role, if any, construction cranes in the area played, he said. They'll focus on the engine, the airframe, the pilot and the environment.

A crane operator was in radio contact with the pilot on a prior landing on a rooftop helipad, though there's no substantial evidence to link the cranes with the crash, Hogenson said.

Investigators also are poring over pilot, maintenance and company records, and they will recreate the crash scene to look for anomalies, he said.

The helicopter wasn't equipped with a cockpit voice recorder or flight data recorder, which aren't required.

It may be months before federal investigators know what caused the KOMO-TV news helicopter to hit the pavement and burst into flames Tuesday, setting three vehicles ablaze and spewing burning fuel down the street.

A preliminary report could be released at the end of this week or Monday. A final report with a cause could take as long as a year.

The investigation team includes representatives from Airbus Helicopters, engine manufacturer Turbomeca, as well as the helicopter operator.

Witnesses reported hearing unusual noises coming from the aircraft as it lifted off from the helipad on top of Fisher Plaza, KOMO's headquarters, after refueling. Witnesses also reported seeing the helicopter rotate before it crashed.

"It pitched sideways. It was off balance, and you could tell right away something wasn't right," said Bo Bain, an excavation foreman at a nearby construction project who watched the aircraft take off. "The helicopter was struggling to stay up. It spun around, hit the top of the tree and landed on the street."

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<http://www.kttn.com/kgozfm/modules/news/article.php?storyid=111794>

Seconds later, "It was just a fireball. The whole thing burst into flames," he said.

On Wednesday, people left flowers at the crash site to remember former KOMO veteran photographer Bill Strothman, 62, and pilot Gary Pfitzner, 59. Both men were working for Helicopters Inc., which owned the Eurocopter AS350 helicopter. The aircraft was leased jointly by KOMO and KING-TV.

The King County medical examiner's office said Wednesday that both men died of blunt force injuries.

Hogenson said the pilot had about 7,700 hours of overall flight experience and about 900 hours in the model that crashed. The last maintenance inspection occurred in January, and there were no outstanding issues, he said.

"If I knew I had Bill guiding me through a story, with his eyes looking through the lens, I knew my story would be better," said Denise Whitaker, a KOMO reporter and anchor.

Whitaker added that she always felt welcomed and safe when she flew with Gary Pfitzner. "He'd give me a grand tour of the city when possible," she said.

Mark Pfitzner told KOMO that his brother, Gary, put himself through flight school, loved to fly and "tried to do his best reporting for people."

News anchor and reporter Molly Shen remembered Strothman as "one of the best storytellers to have ever graced the halls of KOMO."

Richard Newman, 38, who suffered serious burns when the helicopter crashed on his car, was breathing on his own Wednesday, said Susan Gregg, a spokeswoman at Harborview Medical Center. The Seattle man remained in serious condition.

A man and a woman who were in vehicles that were struck by the helicopter were uninjured.