

Investigation continues on AirHeart1

BY PASHA CARROLL
 SUN REPORTER

Members of the fire, rescue and health care community remain confused, angry and grief-stricken as officials search for the cause of the crash of an AirHeart helicopter that killed three crewmen.

The helicopter crashed into the Choctawhatchee Bay sometime between 12:45 and 6:30 a.m. Oct. 20, with crew members Tom Palcic, a pilot employed by Metro Aviation, Jack Chase, a Sacred Heart flight nurse, and Robert Heighton, a paramedic from the South Walton Fire District, on board.

The bodies of Palcic and Chase were recovered from the wreckage of the helicopter Wednesday morning. Heighton's body was found shortly before noon the next day less than a mile from the crash site.

Chase, 47, lived in Santa Rosa Beach and was a registered nurse with Sacred Heart.

Palcic, 63, a resident of Fort Walton Beach, had 27 years and 7,000 hours of flight experience. He was employed by the Shreveport, La. based company Metro Aviation with air medical transport operations around the country.

Heighton, a Gulf Breeze resident, was a paramedic employed by the South Walton Fire District.

Investigators from the National Transportation Safety Board and Federal Aviation Administration arrived Wednesday afternoon to begin their investigation.

In addition to determining what caused the helicopter to go down, investigators will attempt to determine why protocol was not followed by the Walton County Emergency Operations Center.

Operating procedures call for contact every 10 minutes, upon departure and upon arrival, Gary



MARI DARR-WELCH/Florida Freedom News

Above, an unidentified member of law enforcement unloads debris from AirHeart1 that divers gathered Wednesday.

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Flags lowered for AirHeart crew

By HEATHER CIVIL
 FLORIDA FREEDOM NEWS SERVICE

On Wednesday, flags were lowered to half staff as members of AirHeart flight crews gathered at the South Walton hangar to console one another after an AirHeart helicopter crashed into the Choctawhatchee Bay at approximately 12:40 a.m. Sadness hung heavy in the air for those assembled at the AirHeart hangar located next to the Walton County Sheriff's Station on U.S. Highway 331.

The eight pilots, 12 paramedics and 12 nurses that make up AirHeart's flight crews are brothers and sisters, said Monica Diaz, outreach coordinator for AirHeart.

"This is their home away from home," she said sadly.

The small gathering of friends and family at the hangar cried and held each

other - mourning for their lost friends.

Everyone there knows the inherent danger of flying helicopter missions, but knowing the risks doesn't take any of the pain away when lives are lost, explained Diaz.

For each mission flown, AirHeart has a flight crew of one pilot, one paramedic and one nurse. Since 2001, both helicopters have flown 1,700 missions.

The mission Wednesday morning was supposed to be a fairly routine patient transfer from HealthMark Regional Medical Center in DeFuniak Springs to Sacred Heart Hospital on the Emerald Coast.

But the weather was bad and the pilot decided to turn around and head back to South Walton. The helicopter never made it back to base.

"It's like losing family members," Diaz said.



Lori Ceier/The Sun

South Walton Fire District lowered all station flags to half staff on Oct. 20.

Not ready to give up

By JOYCE OWEN
 SUN REPORTER

South Walton Fire District's Chaplain Matt Rezmer counseled grief-stricken firefighters who were upset with news reports Wednesday that referred to a third member of the AirHeart1 crew as the remaining body to be found.

"To them," Rezmer said. "He's still with them."

Rezmer understands the firefighters' reactions. "This is a family with a big heart. They are not ready to give up on one of their own."

Rezmer headed out to the AirHeart hangar on Oct. 20 after he heard reports of the crash of AirHeart1 with

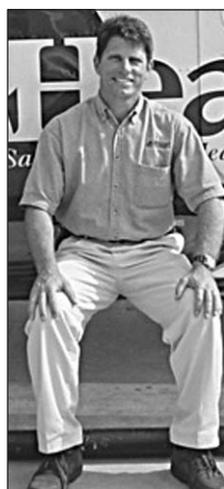
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News

AirHeart1

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Pablo, director of Sacred Heart Medical Services, said at a press conference held at noon Wednesday at Sacred Heart Hospital on the Emerald Coast.



Chase

The Sacred Heart Health System's air ambulance left its hangar in South Walton at 12:41 a.m., responding to a call from Healthmark Regional Medical Center, DeFuniak Springs, to transport a critically ill heart patient to a Pensacola hospital.

Four minutes later, the crew radioed the Walton County Emergency Operations Center and said they

were aborting the mission because of weather conditions.

The crew was expected back at the base within 10 minutes, but was never heard from again.

A call for help was never made.

The helicopter was not discovered missing until the Wednesday morning flight crew reported for work, said Director of AirHeart Randy Layman.

On Thursday, the EOC was working on a statement about the delayed response regarding the downed helicopter and the



Heighton

void in communication between AirHeart and the crew, Burke said.

Dispatch tapes are being pulled from the EOC as part of the investigation, said Layman.

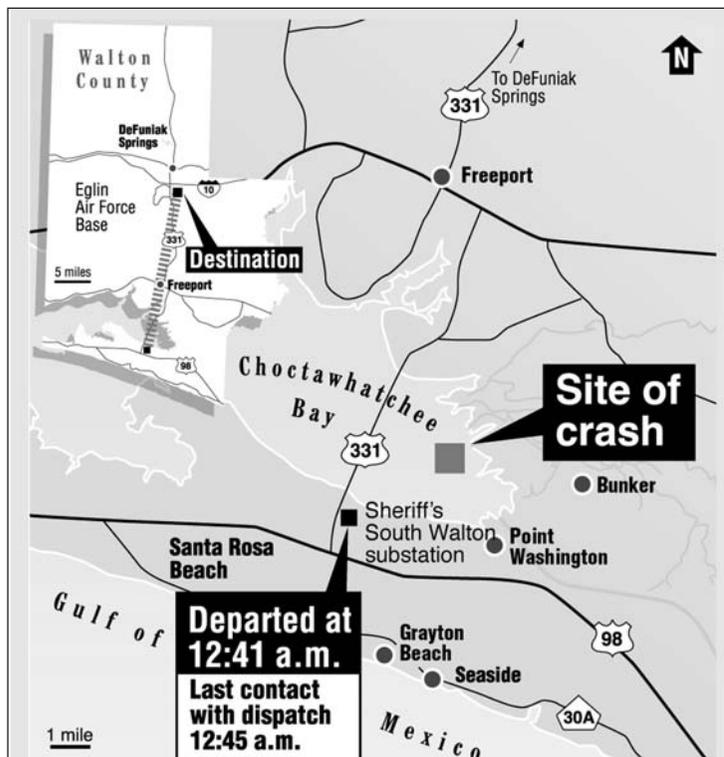
NTSB will be in Walton County investigating the crash until Saturday. Beyond then, Kennedy said it would be three to four months for lab work and to go through all of the wreckage and thoroughly examine it.

A five-member NTSB board will determine the cause of the crash once the investigation has been completed. Lead investigator Jeff Kennedy said it could take up to a year for a final determination.

It is thought bad weather may have contributed to or caused the accident.

"The engine is examined to check for any malfunctions," Kennedy said, but NTSB does not speculate on the cause of a crash.

He said the helicopter was raised from the water and put on a barge to be



Craig Terry/Florida Freedom News

taken to a hangar for a detailed investigation.

"It (AirHeart) was fairly beat up and had a fairly good amount of damage

because of impact to the water," Kennedy said about the condition of the helicopter after it was lifted from the bay on Wednesday.

The first debris from the helicopter was found in the bay about a mile east of the 331 bridge when the search was initiated at daylight on Wednesday.

"This is a terrible tragedy," said Patrick J. Madden, president and CEO of Sacred Heart Health System. "We have lost three brave people, true heroes who dedicated themselves to saving the lives of others. We extend our deepest sympathies to the families and associates of these men."

Family

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crew members from the fire district on board.

Later as he traveled to the fire stations to offer support, Rezmer noticed a similar reaction that many had after 9-11.

"They were reaching out to loved ones. They were talkative. This made them stop and think about the value of life.

"These guys realize the demands and dangers of their job, but they hadn't experienced this yet in their job."

But, he noted, they also were a restless bunch, "Like little kids sitting on hot tacks. They wanted to be out there doing something."

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