

Statement of incident

John M. Rawls, IV

Aircraft mishap on 02 May, 2017

On 02 May, 2017 writer was performing the duties of pilot in command on a Bell 206BIII helicopter registered as N911GE to the Marion County Sheriff's Office, Ocala, Florida. Writer reported for duty on the above date at approximately 1445 hours local time and had already heard about a request for assistance made by Marion County Fire Rescue via radio. Writer conducted a preflight inspection of the aircraft and departed the airfield at approximately 1500 hours local time for the aerial firefighting mission.

Upon arrival in the area of the fire, writer landed in a cleared field, rigged the firefighting bucket (Bambi-Bucket), donned a Personal Flotation Device (PFD), and began firefighting operations. After approximately 25-30 water drops, writer returned to the same cleared field mentioned above, refueled, and returned to fighting the fire. All water pickups before and after refueling were made using Bay Lake as the water source. On the third or fourth water pick-up after refueling is when the mishap occurred.

When writer began to lift the bucket from the water, a severe out of center of gravity (CG) condition developed in the aircraft. During the ascent the CG dramatically and quickly shifted to the right and could not be counteracted with full left cyclic control input. Writer immediately believed that one or more water bucket suspension cable(s) were entangled on the right landing skid. Writer attempted to release the water from the bucket to reduce the CG imbalance but there was no effect. Writer also rocked the aircraft fore and aft in attempt to free the cables also to no avail. After these efforts failed writer jettisoned the bucket by actuating the cargo hook release switch. Writer heard the "clunk" sound normally heard with the release of the cargo hook load. Immediately thereafter, writer heard a second "clunk" louder than the first. The aircraft immediately began to yaw to the right and after four to six rotations the aircraft impacted the water.

After the aircraft submerged, rolled right and came to rest; writer egressed the aircraft through the left cockpit door and swam to the surface. Upon reaching the surface writer inflated his PFD and swam to the East bank of the lake. Once out of the water writer called 911 from a personal cell phone to request rescue.

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