

Witness Statement from the Rock Incident,
as seen by J.Hewitt of MIHC during the Polles Fire

07.07.2020

Background:

MIHC was assigned to Division Delta on the North side of the Polles fire for the previous 2 shifts, and at the time of the accident, my role was Lookout for the crew, (34°16.403, 111°31.585) There were multiple aircraft working the fire, some with bucket drop missions, and others with sling load missions. My viewpoint above the fire allowed for full observation of the fire area, and put me at eye-level with 3PB.

Incident Observations:

At approximately 12:10 I saw 3PB leave H2 and fly in a clockwise path around the North side of Div D, to approach H5 with a slingload from the East. The path seemed normal, and had been completed for previous slingloads. The distance between the two sites was almost a mile, and large supplies of food, water, and gear needed to be moved to continue supporting operations.

When 3PB was near my location setting up for a final approach I noticed a dramatic tail drop, which I assumed was an attempt to slow the ship and sling load before closing the distance to H5.

This movement put the suspended external load into a pendulum motion, swinging the load forward with the direction of travel. The pilot attempted to slow the slingload with a series corrections, which took the pendulum 3 times to settle down. At this point I thought something was wrong. The movements of the ship were erratic and out of character.

3PB then turned 90 degrees East, towards my Lookout and parallel with the Whiterock Rim. The load began a second round of pendulum swings, and the pilot attempted corrections again, but the ship did not respond, only to fly closer to the slope of Rim.

The tail of the aircraft dropped sharply until the system was completely vertical, and the cockpit slanted left and arched into the ground. I never saw any smoke, heard any abnormal sounds, or saw load punched.

The helicopter landed on its left door mid-slope with a deafening silence and immediately burst into flames. I called out on our Crew channel "the ship just went down" and ran over to a lookout just above the incident. The radio traffic from the division changed from normal operations to rescue response. I could see people from all over the division running toward the column.

At 12:20 Mesa IHC was first on-scene, assessing for a survivor potential, and cutting line to contain additional fire spread. Mormon Lake, Blue Ridge, and other Overhead made their way over, cutting a P line for access, and assisting with the transition in operations.

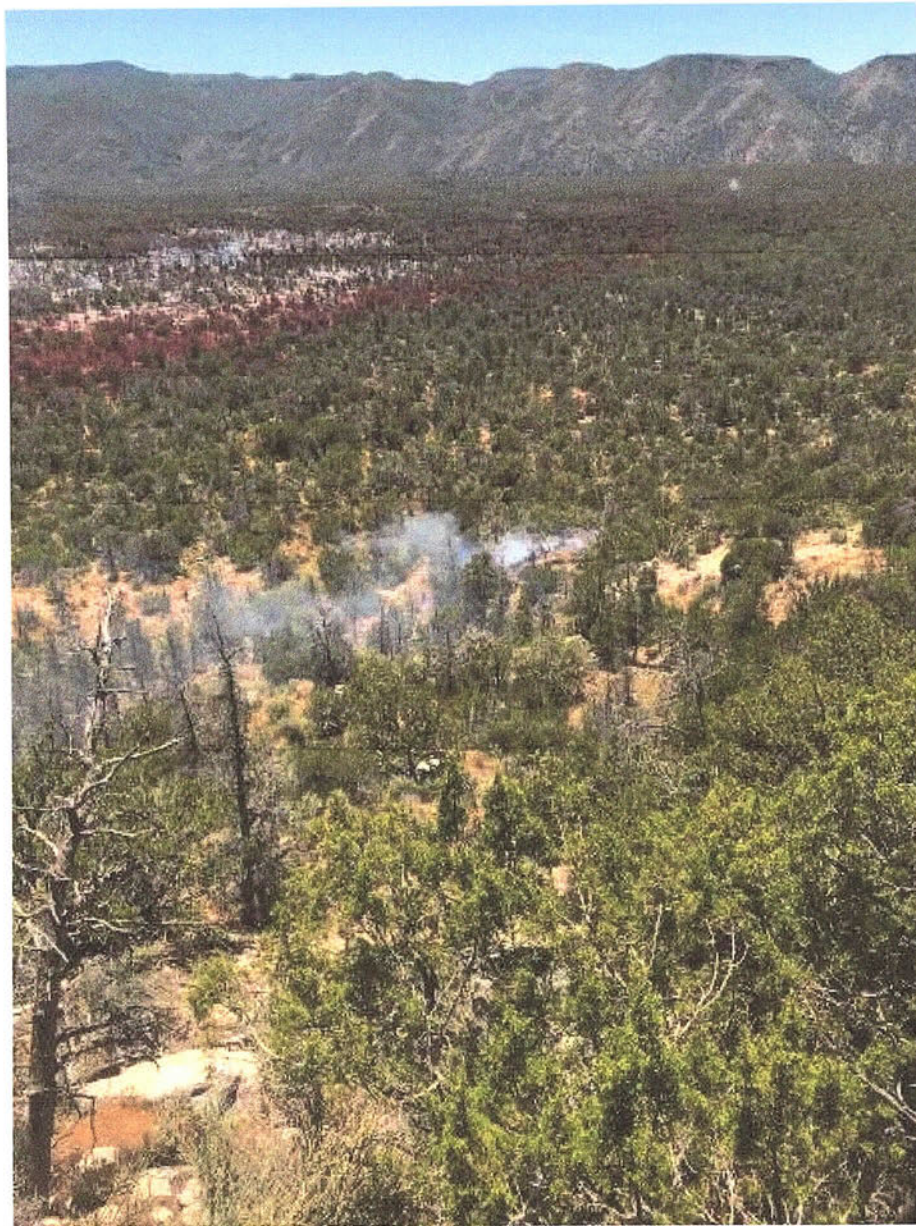
719 made additional bucket drops on the 3PB to keep the jet-fueled fire from growing and moving up the slope. 2 spot fires were found within a Chain. The VLAT and LAT dropped additional retardant up on top of the Whiterock Rim as contingency line.

The scene was flagged for security, the spot fires were contained, and the overhead made the appropriate radio calls to ensure fire operation continued. Around 16:45 MIHC was released from the Polles fire and hiked the AZT out to the LF Ranch. Crew shuttle was supported by the Operations team, and we were back to the Buggies by dark.

John Hewitt

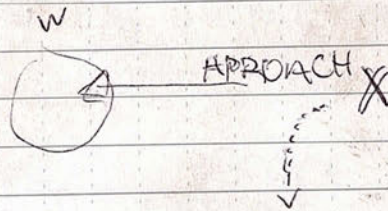
07.08.2020





12-15 - SWING LOADS
Z HS

SHIP COUNTER SWUNG
w/ LOAD, BEGAN Z
PENDULUM, STRAIGHTENED
OUT & CORRECTED,
2ND IMPBALANCE w/
TAIL DROP



NO COUNTERS, NO SMOKE

Rite in the Rain

I, Joseph Mahlau, was working on a hot ash-pit on the north side of the Polles fire when I heard weird rotor-wash from a helicopter. I looked up and saw a helicopter under load with a dark object beneath it, contents unknown. It was unstable in the air, gyrating like a top that's slowing down, with the load swinging in a circular motion below. The aircraft was facing southwest initially, altitude unknown, but was below the ridgeline to its immediate north. The aircraft remained around the same altitude but became increasingly unstable. It started losing altitude, and the load-line was at about a 45-degree angle from the aircraft; the aircraft looked like it was starting to fall backwards towards the side of the ridge. The aircraft had rotated, and was now facing the southeast. The aircraft then pointed skyward in its erratic gyration, and plummeted. I lost sight of it behind the trees, but I immediately heard a sound indicating impact. Dark smoke started rising, and became a thick plume within about 3 seconds. The event from my initial viewing to the impact was about 9 seconds: about 4 seconds being unstable; about 3 seconds in an erratic gyration, and about 2 seconds to plummet. There was no visible smoke coming from the aircraft that I saw. Also, I cannot tell if the noises coming from the Aircraft were because of the changes in orientation of the rotors, or changes in speed.

July 07, 2020

Approximately 1215

I, Joseph Maklav, was working a
hot stamp-hole, when I heard weird
rotor-work from ~~the~~ a helicopter, ~~and~~
~~and~~ ~~and~~ ~~and~~. I looked up and saw
a Huey ~~under~~ under load, with something
black, contents unknown, variable in
the air, like a top that's slowing down,
with the load swinging below. The Huey
was facing the Southwest initially, altitude
unknown, but was below the northern ridge line.
The Huey stayed at the same altitude, but
became ~~more~~ increasingly unstable. It started
losing altitude, the load at approximately a
45° angle underneath, and it looked like
Woo was falling backwards, towards the
South aspect of the ridge. The Huey
was facing Southwest when I lost sight
of it behind trees, but a "fwhump"

"Rite in the Rain"

indicated impact, and black smoke
immediately followed. No smoke was
visible from the aircraft during its
~~descent~~ descent. I'm also unsure if the
~~rotors~~ rotor wash sounding weird was because
of how ~~the~~ the aircraft's rotors were changing
orientation, or because they were changing
speed; the rotors were turning the entire
time I observed it, which was approximately
9 seconds. I observed it for about 4 seconds,
which is about the time it took for the
aircraft to go from unstable to erratic, then
yelled to my crew members. The aircraft was
erratic for about 3 seconds, before it plummeted.
I alerted my ~~son~~ Squad Leader, Robert Dwyer,
and we headed towards the overhauls.

July 07/2020
Time 1342

July 07, 2020
Approximately 1215

I, Joseph Mahler, was working a hot stump-hole, when I heard weird rotor-whir from a helicopter. I looked up and saw a helicopter under load, with something black; contents unknown. It was variable in the air, like a top that's slowing down, with the load swinging in a circular motion below. The aircraft was facing Southwest initially, altitude unknown, but was below the ridgeline to its immediate north. The aircraft remained at the same altitude, but became increasingly variable. As it started losing altitude, the load was at about a 45° angle from beneath the aircraft, and the aircraft looked like it was falling backwards, towards the north aspect of the ridge. The aircraft had rotated, and was facing the Southwest when I lost sight of it behind the trees.

"hit in the rain"

As soon as I lost sight of the aircraft behind
the trees, I heard a "fwohump" from engine,
followed by dark smoke.

No smoke was visible from this aircraft
during its descent. I'm also unsure if the
weird rotorwash was from aircraft's changing
orientation, or from changes in the rotors'
speed, but the rotors were turning the
entire time. I observed it. The event lasted
about 9 seconds. The aircraft was invisible for
about 4 seconds, then I yelped at my crewmembers.
The next 3 seconds, the aircraft was erratic
and the next 2, it was descending rapidly
approximately.

July, 07 2008
Time: 1341

At approximately 1215 pm, my saw partner and I were located on the NW edge of the fire. I noticed Helicopter 3PB flying with a load NE of helispot H5. The pilot looked to make a drastic maneuver, that appeared to be a corrective action to counterbalance the load. 3PB banked hard with the load appearing to be almost horizontal with the ship. I looked over at my saw partner to shift his attention to how the ship was flying. Within the moments of talking with him, I saw 3PB make another 2-3 maneuvers before falling below the tree line, and then hearing the crash. As soon as we witnessed the crash and saw the smoke, we started heading towards the site.


Adam Murray

07/08/2020

I WAS LOCATED ON THE NW
EDGE OF THE FIRE. I NOTICED
THE SHIP FLYING WITH A LOAD
N/NE OF H-5

THE PILOT LOOKED TO MAKE
A DRASTIC MANEUVER, THAT
APPEARED TO BE A CORRECTIVE
ACTION TO COUNTERBALANCE
THE LOAD. THE SHIP BANKED
HARD WITH THE LOAD
APPEARING TO BE ALMOST
HORIZONTAL WITH THE SHIP.

I LOOKED OVER AT MY SAW
PARTNER TO SHIFT HIS ATTENTION
TO THE SHIP AND HOW IT WAS
FLYING. WHILE TALKING WITH HIM
I SAW THE SHIP MAKE APPROX.

Rite in the Rain

①

TWO (2) MORE CORRECTIVE
MANEUVERS BEFORE FALLING
BELOW THE TREE LINE,
THEN HEARING THE CRASH
AND SEEING THE SMOKE.

[REDACTED]
ADAM MURRAY
07/07/2020

② I WAS LOCATED ON THE NW
EDGE OF THE FIRE. I NOTICED
HELD ~~THE~~ ^{HARDLY} MAKE A DRASTIC
^{HAVING A LOAD} MANEUVER. IT APPEARED
TO BE A CORRECTIVE ACTION
TO COUNTER BALANCE THE LOAD
UNDERNEATH, BECAUSE THE LOAD
LOOKED TO BE ALMOST HORIZONTAL
w/ THE SHIP.

I LOOKED OVER AS MY SAW
TO SHIFT HIS ATTENTION
PARTNER AND TOLD HIM TO
TO THE SHIP
LOOK AT THE AND HOW IT WAS
FLYING. ~~APPROX~~ WHILE TALKING
w/ HIM I SAW THE SHIP MAKE
APPROX (2) MORE CORRECTIVE
MANEUVERS ~~UNLESS~~ ^{UNLESS} SAW BEFORE
FALLING BELOW THE TREE LINE
AND HEARING THE CRASH,

Rite in the Rain

NOTICED HEAD # FLYING W/
ALONG N/NE OF HS.

THE PILOT LOOKED TO MAKE
A DRAGGIC MANEUVER
THAT APPEARED TO BE...

7/8/20

To: Pete Schwab, Air Operation Branch Director (AOBD) Southwest IMT1- Team 2- Polles WF (AZ-TNF-001830)

From: David S. Robinson, Air Tactical Group Supervisor (ATGS), N44NC- Polles WF (AZ-TNF-001830)

Subject: Helicopter 3PB Crash July 7th, 2020- Polles WF: Witness Statement Air Attack N44NC

Pete,

Air Attack N44NC was performing aerial supervision (ATGS) duties over the Polles WF mid-day July 7th, 2020; during the ATGS mission a fatal helicopter crash occurred at approximately 12:15 hours (AZ time). The crash occurred north/northeast of Helispot 5 (H-5) outside of the fire perimeter within Division D (DIV D).

Air Attack N44NC was approximately 30 minutes into its mission when the accident occurred. Aircraft with-in the TFR at the time of the accident included: helicopter 73H (Bell 205), helicopter 6AS (Bell 407), helicopter 3AC (Skycrane), helicopter 3PB (UH1H), and Air Attack N44NC (AC690). Air Attack N395AM (outgoing ATGS) was returning to KFFZ and had just cleared the TFR when the helicopter crash occurred.

Air Attack N44NC served as the aerial supervision platform for the Polles WF and the Rock IWI (Incident within an Incident) from 12:00 to 15:00 hours. Listed below is a basic timeline of Air Attack N44NC mission.

Air Attack N44NC Mission Timeline:

- 11:44- N44NC departed KFFZ for relief ATGS on the Polles WF
- 11:55- N44NC on-scene Polles WF, received transition briefing from out-going ATGS N395AM
 - ATGS Transition Briefing Notes:
 - Altimeter 2988, Helicopters 5,000' AGL and below, Fixed Wing 6,000' AGL, Air Attack 7,000' AGL, Incoming Relief ATGS 8,000' AGL
 - Aircraft On-scene:
 - Helicopter 73H- working with Mesa Hotshots- Bucket drops north end of DIV A
 - Helicopter 3AC working with Blue Ridge Hotshots- water drops
 - Helicopter 3PB conducting external cargo operations between Helispot 2 (H-2) and Helispot 5 (H-5), Approx. 4 slings and backhaul
 - Helicopter 6AS north of the fire, on the ground setting up a radio repeater with comm techs (N 34 18.500' W 111 47.1400')
 - No change on radio frequencies- Cargo and Buckets drops are on Air to ground secondary (A/G-2)
 - Potential new sling site (Sling 6 -NW corner of fire) (N 34 16.145 W 111 31.580)
 - Ground Resources:
 - Rapid Extraction Module (REM) Team at H-5, Medic Team 4 at H-2
 - Helitack at H-2 and H-5
 - Morman Lake IHC working near H-2, Mesa IHC working near H-5 towards Blue Ridge IHC in DIV A, Payson working eastside of fire in DIV A
- 12:00- N44NC assumes ATGS of the Polles WF, N395AM retuning to KFFZ for a planned on-scene relief at 15:00hrs
- 12:00-12:15- Air Attack N44NC conducts routine check-ins with air and ground resources
 - ATGS N44NC contacts helibase- AA117 (N44NC) on-scene Polles Fire as Air Attack
 - Helicopter 3AC- needs fuel- ATGS instructs 3AC to fuel at KFFZ and plan on a return to the fire
 - Helicopter 73H- working with Mesa, probably 1-2 more buckets and then looking for a new target/contact

- ATGS N44NC is actively listening to helicopter 3PB working with helitack at H-2 and H-5 on the A/G-2 frequency, ATGS has visual contact on sling work occurring, plans to call 3PB in a few minutes when 3PB is not on A/G-2, radio traffic regarding sling missions sounds normal.
 - ATGS N44NC attempts to contact DIV-A
 - ATGS N44NC contacts Blue Ridge IHC- provides update on helicopter 3AC- fuel and return for additional water drops
 - ATGS N44NC observes helicopter 3PB transitioning from H-2 to H-5 with an external load
 - ATGS N44NC contacts DIV D-Trainee, provides quick update on fire behavior in DIV D
- Approx. 12:13- N44NC is entering a wide right turn at SW corner of DIV-D, ATGS observes helicopter 73H headed to the dip site, ATGS N44NC is in the process of switching radio channel when ATGS Pilot N44NC says "Oh Shit" over ICS, pilot points to area near H-5. ATGS observes rising white and black smoke north of H-5. ATGS assumes there is a spot fire and tells pilot to head that way, as pilot turns he says he saw large dust cloud rise before black smoke began to rise, both pilot and ATGS immediately realize an aircraft has crashed near H-5. As N44NC heads toward black smoke DIV-D announces on air to ground primary (A/G-1) "we just had a helicopter crash in north end of Division-Delta, ground resources are responding to area, clear the radio for emergency radio traffic". ATGS acknowledges radio traffic.
- 12:15- ATGS N44NC contacts Polles Helibase on A/G1 "Helibase- Air Attack-- we just had an aircraft crash on north end of fire near H-5 in DIV-D, appears to be 3PB, launch medical personnel immediately, aircraft is on fire, ATGS instructs Helibase to switch to A/G-2... in order to keep A/G-1 clear for responding resources" ATGS N44NC attempts to reach Polles Communications via Tonto NF Fire Net 2 Diamond Repeater, no contact; ATGS N44NC attempts to reach Phoenix Dispatch on National Flight Following, no contact, ATGS contacts Phoenix Dispatch on Diamond Repeater and orders 2- Large Air Tankers and a Lead (fire from crash is burning upslope, outside of containment lines), ATGS informs Phoenix Dispatch there has been an aircraft crash on the Polles fire. While ATGS is communicating on A/G-1 and A/G-2; ATGS instructs ATGS Pilot to contact helicopter 73H on "rotor -victor", have helicopter 73H begin to drop water on the crash site to suppress fire. ATGS orders a Type 1 helicopter with bucket from Helibase (helicopter 917). Helicopter 6AS contacts ATGS- "we are about done with repeater mission.... Can we help?.... ATGS ask how long until repeater mission is complete... 5 minutes, copy- finish and load up...contact me when ready to lift"
- 12:16 Approx.- Outgoing ATGS N395AM calls on TFR frequency and offers to return and assist, ATGS N44NC thanks 5AM for the offer but request 5AM to continue to KFFZ and hold...
- 12:20 Approx.- ATGS is contacted by ROCK incident- "Air Attack—Rock IC---I am on-scene of the accident, I will be IC, IC Fuller, incident name is ROCK, continue water drops on eastside of crash, we have hazmat concerns, ground personnel are attempting to line the fire and access the site, I have REMS 5, REMS 1, and Mesa on-scene" "Commo on the ground will be on Tac 2" "location is N 34 16.3090 W 111 31.6562" ATGS- "Copy All- I have 2- LATS and a Lead on Order, a Type 1 helo with bucket, and helibase is sending medical resources, A/G-1 is all yours, I will relay update to Helibase", Helicopter 6AS contacts ATGS "6AS ready to lift, copy clear to lift..... 6AS—can we be of assistance? ATGS—"Negative head north and return to helibase...thank-you"
- 12:25 Approx.- Helicopter 917 arrives and begins water drops, Helicopter 73H returns to base for a fuel and hold.
- 12:47- ATGS N44NC receives a text from AOBD--- "AZ DPS Ranger 1 has been ordered, may be fastest method of transport, command repeater is operational,
- 12:52- ATGS N44NC calls AOBD (via cellphone)- "copy update on Ranger 1, crash appears to be fatal, awaiting confirmation from ground resources"
- 13:00 Approx.- Lead 47, Tanker 103, Tanker 15 arrive on scene... each tanker drops a load of retardant, "indirect" north of the accident site on the top of the mesa. ATGS and Lead 47 request a load and return to "hook" towards the NE corner of the original retardant line on the fire... All retardant drop locations

were discussed with ROCK IC to ensure responder safety was maintained. Helicopter 917 continues to make water drops on the accident site.... Ranger 1 contacts ATGS... ATGS informs Ranger 1 "personnel on-scene, awaiting update and needs"... Ranger 1 advises they are on another mission but will be back over the area soon and check back in.

- 13:15- ATGS receives text from AOB- "Can you confirm fatal?" "Have site secured for investigation"
- Approx. 13:15- Helicopter 69H inserts additional medical personnel into H-5
- 13:45 Approx.- Tanker 103, Tanker 15, and Lead 47 complete their mission and return to KIWA for a "hold"
- 14:07- ROCK IC informs ATGS N44NC- "REMS1, DIV-D, 2- Price Valley HECMs, and ROCK IC... are only resources left on scene at the ROCK incident" "crews are returning back to the line to rest and recover", ATGS acknowledges info and relays info to Helibase via A/G-2
- 14:30 Approx- TV15 Helicopter contacts ATGS N44NC on TFR frequency and requests entry into TFR. ATGS clears TV15 into TFR at 8,000' AGL..... Air Attack is at 7,000' AGL....no other aircraft over the fire..... Based on aircraft performance TV15 request a lower altitude... ATGS authorizes 6,000' AGL... TV15 arrives on-scene, makes several laps around the area and ask about downed aircraft location... ATGS N44NC does not provide details/info regarding accident location... Ranger 1 contacts ATGS.. they are back in the area... ATGS advises Ranger 1 to land at KPAN and stand-by for additional needs.
- 14:45 Approx- TV15 exits the TFR area
- 14:55- Relief Air Attack N395MA arrives on-scene for scheduled "relief" coverage. ATGS N44NC and ATGS N395MA conduct Air Attack transition briefing.
- 15:00- ATGS N44NC leaves the fire and returns to KFFZ (end of mission)
- 15:16- N44NC- On the ground KFFZ

The timeline and description of events listed above is based on my mission "kneeboard" notes and my memory. I did not see helicopter 3PB crash, prior to the crash I had visual confirmation of 3PB performing cargo work between H-2 and H-5, I did not hear any emergency radio traffic on the Air-to-Air or Air-to-Ground radio frequencies before the accident occurred. I performed to the best of my ability to assist those responding on the ground and to provide information back to helibase and the IMT.

If you have any questions or additional information needs; please let me know.

Thank you-

/s/ David S. Robinson

ATGS N44NC, Polles WF (AZ-TNF-001830)

Fire Management Officer, Shenandoah National Park

[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

July 7, 2020

Polles Fire
Helicopter 3PB Incident

ATGS: Piechura, Jeff on N395AM
Documentation started 7/7/2020 at 1250 hours

Approximately 1200 hrs: I was flying ATGS over the Polles Fire on the first shift 0900-1200 hrs. Completed briefing with Air Attack 117 Dave Robinson taking control of the fire at approximately 1210.

Helicopter 3PB was assigned sling cargo missions moving supplies from Helispot (HS) 2 to HS 5. There were four (4) sling loads planned plus a back-haul to Helibase.

3PB was still in process of moving the sling loads during the Briefing of the relief Air Attack. Helitanker 3AC was finishing their last drop before returning to FFZ for fuel and return. Type 3 Helo 6SA was on the ground west of the fire on a repeater mission. Type 2 Helo 73H was doing bucket work for Mesa Hot Shots. The briefing was completed. Air Attack 177 took the fire. N395AM departed the fire back to Falcon Field (FFZ).

Approximately five minutes into the return flight, I heard Polles Air Attack (Robinson) call on the Air to Ground Primary frequency to Helibase declaring an emergency. I heard that, a helicopter has crashed landed and is on fire north of the Polles Fire. Subsequent radio traffic from Robison stated that the helicopter was on fire prior to crash landing.

I called Polles Air Attack (Robinson) on the Fixed-Wing Victor frequency to see if he wanted us to return to provide coverage. Robinson stated he had the incident and he would let me know.

We returned to FFZ without incident.

12:30: I was contacted by the Region 3 Fixed Wing Coordinator R.J. Estes and briefed him of the event.

12:33: I called Coronado Aviation Manager Sean Cox to brief him of the event.

13:03: I called R3 RASM Jennifer Martynuik and left a message

13:12: Call from R3 RASM Martynuik who was briefed along with the RO.

Jeff Piechura
ATGS (AD)
Coronado National Forest
Tucson, Az

