

Fabian Salazar
Air Safety Investigator
Western Pacific Region

Date: February 6, 2025

Subject: WPR25LA034 / Record of Conversation

Contact: Michael Sobotta, Hunter and Witness to the Accident

During a telephone interview, Mr. Sobotta provided the following information:

- He was part of an elk hunting party that does this same trip every year and used the same helicopter services in the past to get to the campground, a trailhead.
- They have a routine that they go through every year, so they know what to do, and know what to expect.
- This was the first year that this pilot supported the hunt.
- Mr. Sobotta was taken to the campground earlier in the day by the same pilot. This was the first time he had flown with the accident pilot. A second hunter, Dave, was already at the campground.
- The pilot had dropped Dave off at the campground the Tuesday prior to the accident.
- There was a group of hunters that were located at the trailhead, and they typically shuttle gear, via helicopter, between the trailhead and the campground.
- Typically, after some of the hunters are dropped off at the campground, the gear is loaded up from the trailhead and brought to them.

- The helicopter used a 100 ft long line and multiple nets to shuttle gear between the campground and the trailhead. The pilot would drop off a net, then pick up an empty one and take it to the other location, then repeat the process.
- He and Dave heard the helicopter approaching and walked to the drop off point and saw the helicopter approaching.
- The helicopter's approach did not seem different than what he had seen in the past.
- When the helicopter arrived overhead, he and Dave were looking up at the net and nothing seemed different than what he had seen in the past.
- The net initially came down at a slow rate till about 10 ft off the ground. It then started coming down faster than before, enough to cause alarm.
- He looked up and saw that the pilot had released the line from the helicopter and the clevis/shackle was falling toward them.
- He knew something was wrong because that wasn't the plan. He was supposed to hover, and the long line was supposed to remain attached.
- They both ran, about 15 ft. from underneath the helicopter. Dave tripped and fell into the sage brush, and he (Mike S.) watched as the helicopter slowly descended and hit the hillside.
- Prior to the accident, he didn't see anything crazy. The pilot didn't come in fast and there wasn't anything unusual until the net started coming down fast.
- After the impact, they initially both ran toward the helicopter and then he turned and ran up the hill to make calls.
- He called the owner of the helicopter and reported the accident.
- Dave helped get the pilot out of the helicopter and the pilot was good [not injured].
- He said that the owner called the sheriff and reported the accident.
- The sheriff arrived and took the pilot with them when they left.

- When asked, he replied that he didn't hear anything different from the helicopter before it started descending.
- He recalled that the weather was about 50 degrees with calm winds about the time of the accident.
- He recalled the helicopter came straight at them and didn't circle around like the second pilot did when he came out later in the day, and the winds had picked up. The second pilot came in with a 150 ft line. The second pilot came into a hover then came down with the load.
- He recalled that when the accident pilot approached, he came in straight at them and his approach wasn't like a hover, it was like a touch and go. There wasn't necessarily a hover right above them. It wasn't like he came into a hover then brought it down. He stated that the accident pilot's approach was not like he was coming in hot [fast] and dropping the load then flying off. There was enough of a hover that he and Dave could see the net coming down out of the air.
- From the many times that he had seen this type of approach before, he didn't see anything that stood out differently.
- When asked, he did not know the weight of the load in the net, but estimated it was less than 600 pounds, which is what they shoot for.
- He recalled that there is a scale at the trailhead for weighing loads.
- He recalled that the helicopter pilot looks out the door so that they can relay hand signals to him, which is crucial for them.

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Contact: David "Dave" Oliver, Hunter and Witness to the Accident

During a telephone interview, Mr. Oliver provided the following information:

- He was part of a hunting group. They use a section of land that is tucked back from the main roads.
- He flew in on the Tuesday prior to the accident.
- Mike, the hunter, not the pilot, flew in on the first flight of the day. He had a little bit of gear with him. They came from the airport.
- The pilot then flew down to the trail head. This was the usual plan so that the helicopter did not have to go all the way back to the airport to pick up hunters.
- He had flown with Baker aircraft for about 15 years, and from his experience, everything seemed normal and not out of the ordinary.
- He explained that there is one LZ, but one side of the LZ, stuff goes to one tent, and on the other side of the LZ stuff goes to another tent.
- They give hand signals to the pilot to tell him where to set it down.
- The pilot's door was open and he pointed out to the pilot where to set the net.

- On this flight, the pilot was to hover while they removed the items from the net.
- He approached and he noticed that the net was dropping fast, he looked up and was waving his hands to alert the pilot that the net was coming in fast.
- He saw that the shackle from underneath the helicopter was falling.
- He turned to run and was not looking where his feet were going. He tripped on some sagebrush and fell.
- He did not see the helicopter as it impacted the hillside.
- He got to his feet as fast as he could and ran to the helicopter.
- Once at the helicopter he yelled for the pilot.
- The pilot's door was open, and his feet were sticking out of the helicopter. He was not responsive at first.
- The engine had shut itself off at that time.
- He saw the pilot move his legs inside the helicopter.
- He pried the door open and assisted the pilot getting out.
- They walked away from the helicopter.
- He checked the pilot for injuries and found none.
- They made sure that the helicopter was safe and secured.
- He did not recall exactly hearing the engine running.
- He thought that it only took him about 20 seconds to get to the helicopter.
- He did not recall anything different on this flight than all the times before. Nothing appeared out of the ordinary up until the time that the shackle was falling from the helicopter.

- He had only flown with the accident pilot once before the accident and had no opinions of his flying skills.
- He did not take any photos or videos of the flight.
- He didn't think that the helicopter sounded any different than before
- He estimated the winds were at zero to one MPH.
- He recalled the second helicopter came in to support the hunt and that other helicopter was a Robinson R-44.
- He believed that the folks at the trailhead had a scale to help get the weight of the loads.
- He stated that they do try to keep things below 600 pounds.
- He recalled that his brother-in-law was at the trailhead and would provide information for the investigation.
- He said that they typically load the bulky things with weight first.
- He stated that, of the items that were in the load that was dropped, they lost two eggs that cracked. Everything else was fine.

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Contact: Daniel "Dan" Hill, Hunter and Witness to the loading of the Accident Load

During a telephone interview, Mr. Hill provided the following information:

- He was at the trailhead when the helicopter came in for the first load.
- The pilot landed and they talked to him about how they were going to get into the campground.
- They had the gear split into loads.
- The first one was loaded with coolers, a stove, drinks (water, beer Gatorade, etc.) chainsaws, and propane) Things that wouldn't get effected if they got wet
- The pilot went to lift the load and couldn't get off. They removed some of the items and the pilot lifted the load and took off.
- They later got a call that the helicopter had crashed.
- He recalled that there were two people at the campground to help unload.
- He stated that they were two separate groups that hunt together. In the past they had weighed everything but this time they estimated the load.