

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

NATIONAL TRANSPORTATION SAFETY BOARD

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Investigation of:

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AIR METHODS CORPORATION  
LIFENET HELICOPTER ACCIDENT  
AUGUST 26, 2011  
NEAR MOSBY, MISSOURI

Docket No.: CEN11FA599

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Interview of: BRIAN THOMAS

Thursday,  
October 13, 2011

The above-captioned matter convened, pursuant to notice.

BEFORE: MALCOLM BRENNER, Ph.D.  
Senior Human Performance Investigator

APPEARANCES:

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National Transportation Safety Board  
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<u>ITEM</u>	<u>I N D E X</u>	<u>PAGE</u>
Interview of Brian Thomas:		
By Dr. Brenner		4



1 company fuel at the pad, so a lot of aircraft ferrying from Rapid  
2 City, somewhere, you know, stop on the way. So I met him once  
3 then, and the second time I met him was on the Saturday before the  
4 accident when I ferried an aircraft to St. Joe.

5 Q. Tell me about that.

6 A. The meeting?

7 Q. Yeah, uh-huh.

8 A. Yeah. We landed. I sat down and he was right there to  
9 receive -- I mean, not to receive. He was waiting for their  
10 aircraft to show up. He was already ready for his night shift.  
11 And this would have been around 5:00 in the evening, I guess. So  
12 -- and my lead pilot has got a little airplane, so the way he --  
13 we did it was I flew the helicopter to St. Joe. He followed in  
14 his little airplane and flew me back.

15 Q. Oh, all right.

16 A. So, while we waited for him to show up, I went into the  
17 trailer and we were sitting and chatting. And, basically, he was  
18 talking -- he told me about what he was doing there. I asked him  
19 how many more days you've got on the shift, and he said I'm hoping  
20 for a quiet night because I get off tomorrow and I drive to  
21 Lincoln, Nebraska, where my dad is going to have heart surgery at  
22 the Nebraska Heart Hospital. So this was his last day, and then  
23 he said he was going to come back to St. Joe.

24 And I asked him about Rapid City. I knew he had  
25 transferred, so I asked him. He said, yeah, I'm kind of covering

1 shifts here and working in Rapid and that kind of thing.

2 Basically --

3 Q. Why did they move to Rapid City?

4 A. He told me that his family and his wife's family were  
5 all from the same area, I mean, up in the Rapid City area.

6 Q. In the Rapid City area, oh.

7 A. Yeah. And so, he said he wanted a transfer and he got  
8 one. And he told me that he had done his B3 conversion recently,  
9 and I didn't press him on the dates or anything, but -- so he was  
10 all checked out to basically work at Rapid City and he had been  
11 doing that.

12 Q. All right. And if I understand, he was on duty when you  
13 were there; is that right, or --

14 A. Yes. I mean, he was getting ready to take over the  
15 night shift.

16 Q. Oh, so he had the night shift?

17 A. Yeah.

18 Q. I see. So he was just there early actually?

19 A. Yeah, he was there early.

20 Q. Uh-huh. What was his mood like?

21 A. He was, you know, absolutely normal. I mean, he wasn't  
22 in any -- I couldn't, you know, see any reason -- he was being  
23 very hospitable, very social, you know, very -- even when my boss  
24 showed upon on the plane, he chatted with him for about 5 minutes,  
25 and then we left, so --

1 Q. What did he chat about with your boss?

2 A. Basic stuff, you know, the flooding on the Missouri,  
3 and, you know -- so those kinds of things. Because that was a big  
4 thing, you know, because it had -- the flooding had blocked off  
5 the interstate, and so, you know, so basic local stuff. He said  
6 that -- my boss was telling him how he couldn't see, you know,  
7 where the river ended and where the roads began. It was, you  
8 know, chitchat, basic -- nothing professional otherwise.

9 Q. All right. And you say you met him once before?

10 A. Yes.

11 Q. Where was that?

12 MR. SILLIMAN: Yeah, come on in.

13 MR. BRENNER: One second.

14 (Interruption; conversation about changing rooms.)

15 BY DR. BRENNER:

16 Q. I'm sorry.

17 A. The last -- when he was ferrying an aircraft to Norfolk,  
18 he -- I acted --

19 Q. How long before was that?

20 A. Oh, that would be the winter of -- yeah, it was winter  
21 of 2010. I really don't remember the month and the date, but I  
22 remember he came and what he was supposed to do was drop the  
23 aircraft off at Norfolk, stay the night in the hotel, and then  
24 rent a car and go back to St. Joe. And I drove him to the hotel  
25 that night, you know, so --

1 Q. Uh-huh. And --

2 A. And basically at that time, he was telling me that he  
3 just joined Air Methods and he had been an Army guy and he done a  
4 tour in Iraq and, you know -- or Afghanistan. I don't remember  
5 which one. Basically giving me his background, and I had told him  
6 mine and -- you know, regular pilot stuff, how was a flight coming  
7 and so on and so forth. That's --

8 Q. Any impressions of him personally or as a pilot, or --

9 A. Pleasant fellow. I mean, I didn't get any, you know,  
10 any vibes that, you know, would turn me off. He was very  
11 pleasant. I mean, very -- again, very easy to talk to and, you  
12 know, he seemed to be very cheerful, you know.

13 Q. And how was his background compared to other pilots?

14 A. Well, Air Methods has got a lot of ex-Vietnam era pilots  
15 who are, you know, kind of retiring. And so getting somebody now  
16 -- and so the hiring, the current hiring process is guys coming  
17 out of tours, you know, flying tours. I mean, that's -- we see a  
18 lot of those. So he was -- he's an unusual guy because, you know,  
19 you rarely see an Army guy these days, you know, getting hired, so  
20 I was kind of surprised. I said, oh, that's good, you know. An  
21 Army guy, you know, getting hired by Air Methods is a good thing.  
22 I mean, that was impression. I thought this is an unusual case  
23 because -- that used to be the standard. I mean, you always got  
24 ex-military guys, but these days it doesn't seem to be that much.

25 Q. Did he ever file grievances?



1           A.    No.  I did check up on that.  He didn't have any  
2 grievances with the company --

3           Q.    Okay.

4           A.    -- with the union or anybody.

5           Q.    Did he have any discipline?

6           A.    Nothing.  Nothing we know of, so --

7           Q.    Did he file ASAP reports?

8           A.    No, no.  I'm on the ASAP ERC.  Even though -- the way  
9 the ERC works, the Event Review Committee, we don't actually see  
10 the names of the pilots involved --

11          Q.    I see.

12          A.    -- because it has to be completely confidential, unless  
13 there is a chance that we might reject the report, in which case  
14 we call the guy and talk to him some more.

15          Q.    I see.

16          A.    So we don't --

17          Q.    How often do pilots file ASAP reports?

18          A.    I would say we get about three a week in the system.

19          Q.    Were there any complaints from the medical staff or any  
20 other pilots about the accident pilot?

21          A.    You mean before the accident?

22          Q.    Before the accident, yeah.

23          A.    No.  I mean, I'm not in contact with St. Joe people, so  
24 that was --

25          Q.    I see.  Any commendations?

1           A.    I mean, just from what I heard, the fact that he was  
2 allowed to transfer out of St. Joe base for which he was hired  
3 within a year -- I mean, less than a year to Rapid City speaks  
4 positively about his, you know, having the ability to, you know,  
5 get the company to approve that, because they thought he was a  
6 good guy and should help him out.  So other than that, I don't  
7 think he -- I don't know about any of his, any other --

8           Q.    Well, was it unusual that he was coming back to backfill  
9 at St. Joe's after he transferred there?

10          A.    Unusual, no.  Because if you look at the bases around  
11 500 miles --

12                   (Interruption; conversation about changing rooms.)

13          MR. THOMAS:  Unusual, no.  Because if you look at the  
14 bases around my base, 500 miles.  You start from Rapid City, come  
15 down to Omaha, go to St. Joe, then there's bases in Nevada;  
16 Kansas; La Monte, Missouri.  Everybody's short at least one.

17                   BY DR. BRENNER:

18          Q.    Why is that?

19          A.    Same reason, attrition, I guess.  You know, people --  
20 older people are retiring or leaving.  St. Joe had a retirement  
21 just a few months before the accident, so --

22          Q.    I see.

23          A.    And the other guy who was of the same age group is  
24 medically -- has a medical problem, so he was out.  So either way  
25 -- and then they set up, started a new base at Cherokee, Iowa,

1 which is also not very far. And again, people are filling in from  
2 other bases. So, it wasn't unusual to have him fill in since he  
3 was familiar with St. Joe --

4 Q. Sure.

5 A. -- working at Rapid, you know. He was helping out to --

6 Q. Anything unusual about the St. Joseph base?

7 A. It's been a base that's been short -- not short, really,  
8 but it's had a lot of pilots go through, you know. The lead pilot  
9 retired, gosh, about 2, 3 years ago. Nobody was there for -- then  
10 they got another pilot to fill, I mean, take over the lead. He  
11 transferred to Lincoln, Nebraska. So they hired a pilot to fill  
12 that position and that guy had a motorcycle accident, so he was  
13 out of the -- so, I mean, the only thing I would say about the  
14 St. Joe base is that there wasn't a lot of supervision for a long  
15 time, I mean, the active lead pilot kind of supervision.

16 Other than that, it's just like any other base, you  
17 know, close-knit group with everybody friends with everybody else  
18 and, you know, hang out together kind of thing, socialize, you  
19 know, barbeques and stuff. But I would say that, yeah, that was a  
20 revolving door as far as, you know, the lead pilot situation is  
21 concerned, but --

22 Q. Are there rumors that the company may close St. Joseph  
23 base?

24 A. I wouldn't think so because they just got them a new  
25 aircraft on, I think, last Friday. Or was it last Saturday? They

1 were up and running and doing flights again.

2 Q. And then there was something in our discussion that, if  
3 I understood, as part of the risk assessment that you conduct, he  
4 would have been vulnerable or attentive because of the length of  
5 time he'd been there and a number of items. Can you describe that  
6 for the record?

7 A. Air Methods has identified four risk factors for a new  
8 hire: one is first time in EMS, that's less than a year with EMS;  
9 less than a year with the company; less than a year flying that  
10 type of aircraft; and less than a year in that area.

11 Now, if we break it up, less than year -- like, you  
12 might have people coming from civilian backgrounds, like civil air  
13 tours or something like that, but an EMS outfit is a completely  
14 different cup of tea. I mean, it's a whole new culture. It's not  
15 the tours anymore. It's not oil and gas. It's something  
16 absolutely new which you ought to, you know, be ready to accept.

17 Air Methods, just by virtue of its size and, you know,  
18 disparity and the strength, has got some very stringent protocols  
19 and operations procedures and, you know, and these don't change on  
20 the whim of, you know, one or two people. I mean, it's a long  
21 process to get an ops manual change, for example, because -- just  
22 by the sheer size of the company. So it was -- it's like for me,  
23 if coming from a military background, it was like going back into  
24 the military because now you had a hierarchy, you had people you  
25 reported to, you had to follow procedures and rules, sign pieces

1 of paper, you know. So that could -- that's a culture change too  
2 for a lot of the people coming in.

3 And then you had, of course, the type of aircraft, which  
4 is -- you know, you could have 5,000 hours on twin engine,  
5 Blackhawks, or whatever. The A-Star is simple, but it can be  
6 quite -- you know, if you don't respect it, it will take charge of  
7 you pretty quickly.

8 Q. What are the kind of areas with the A-Star that you want  
9 to watch for? Is it (indiscernible) --

10 A. It's very squirrely in handling, you know, at least at  
11 the lower level, to hover it and -- initially, when you start the  
12 aircraft. And I always like to say, you know, there are two types  
13 of A-Star pilots: the ones who've done a bad landing, and then  
14 the others who are about to do a bad landing, because there's no  
15 way you can always, 100 percent, you know, make sure that you land  
16 softly and nicely every time.

17 It's got a unique hydraulic system. You've got to  
18 understand that system really well, otherwise, you can end up, you  
19 know, failing the hydraulic system pretty badly. So that's one of  
20 the unique features.

21 It's -- obviously, somebody from a background of  
22 American helicopters, you know, like the Bell or Sikorskys, has to  
23 get used to the other way turning blade, not so much to fly as  
24 much as to think things through, like tail rotor effectiveness,  
25 you know. And the Bell type, it's all, you know, from one

1 direction. Now the wind has to be from the other side for the  
2 tail rotor effectiveness to be there and so on and so forth.

3 Also, it's got some unique features which are, you know,  
4 like the fuel gauges and percentage. You've got to do a math,  
5 little bit of math in that, you know. You've got to say 10  
6 percent is 15 gallons, gives me 20 minutes of flying, you know,  
7 that kind of thing.

8 So these are some of the new things which people might  
9 find in A-Star and, you know, you get -- it's not hard to learn  
10 those things or, you know, get used to them, but it's something  
11 new. And, of course, that area -- and in this case, I would say  
12 that it was a little bit of significance. Because I've been in my  
13 area for 9 years, so I know exactly which airports have jet fuel,  
14 you know, all that stuff. And maybe in his case, since he was not  
15 so familiar, you know, he got into a situation where he landed up  
16 at a place, hoping to have jet fuel and he couldn't find some.

17 Q. How is the autorotation training, especially since  
18 you've been through it?

19 A. Yeah.

20 Q. (Indiscernible) way to ask.

21 A. I think it could be better in terms of frequency. We do  
22 autorotation practice and training once every 6 months, one for  
23 the check ride and one's for the off-cycle. And I don't think  
24 there's any single engine pilot you'll meet who thinks that that's  
25 adequate. I understand the company's side that they cannot do

1 engine-off autorotations because -- to the ground, because we  
2 don't have anything like a training center or department or fleet.  
3 We do all our training on line aircraft. And so, if you have a  
4 couple of, you know, hard landings or, you know, skids broken or  
5 something, now you're taking a revenue aircraft out of service for  
6 a significant time. So I understand the company's view, but I  
7 also believe that it can be more frequent and a little more  
8 realistic in terms of, you know, how we practice it and, you know,  
9 the fact that you don't have an engine at the other end makes a  
10 difference in how you react.

11           And from my personal example, every time we've gone in  
12 for training, the 6-month training, the first autorotation they  
13 say, okay, can you make that marker there; and it's always bad,  
14 you know, because -- but in actual case, you really have no do-  
15 overs, you know, so you have to be really accomplished at that.  
16 So I think we could have it more often, but I don't know how the  
17 company can do that.

18           Q.    Yeah.  Maybe simulators, though, huh?  They were  
19 talking --

20           A.    I think the best compromise is a simulator, maybe, once  
21 you get used to the air sickness.  A simulator like this which we  
22 saw today would be a good middle of the road, at least a stopgap  
23 until we get something better.

24           Q.    How are relations between the company and the union?

25           A.    The company, obviously, did not want the union when --

1 back when they were voted in, so those negotiations are  
2 protracted. We are into the second year -- or we finished the  
3 second year of negotiations for renewal of the contract. It's  
4 been protracted and long and sometimes contentious, obviously,  
5 because both sides have their, you know, views. So, no, I don't  
6 believe the company is happy to have a union on its premises, but  
7 I have to give credit that they have started to accept union  
8 partnership in safety programs. Not -- it's not a rosy thing.  
9 It's still an uphill battle because we're trying to change  
10 cultures here. We're trying to get the company to, you know  
11 accept the pilots' viewpoints and stuff like that, so -- and all  
12 the training, SMS programs, for example, they have actually  
13 invited us to participate, and so that's good, but there's still a  
14 lot of suspicion, if you will. You know, the pilot group kind of  
15 feels the company will hold information they gather from these  
16 programs against them or punish them for something and I think the  
17 onus lies upon the company to change that perception.

18 Q. What are the areas of discussion between the union and  
19 the company that there is a potential disagreement or friction,  
20 or --

21 A. In safety or --

22 Q. Well, in safety, especially in safety, yes.

23 A. Safety, I think they bought the ASAP, which is, I think,  
24 the most mature and well-functioning program, but it is -- I still  
25 believe that we're only getting 10 percent of the reports though



1 actually what's going on out there. And that, according to the  
2 experts, is okay. You know, you're at least getting 10 percent of  
3 self-reporting where you can fill the little safety holes. So the  
4 ASAP is probably the best program we have right now with the  
5 company.

6           LOSA, for a while, that, you know, Line-Oriented Safety  
7 Audit, that was -- initially when they did the first round of LOSA  
8 observations, they sent out check airmen and managers to watch how  
9 people do their job and, obviously, that wasn't going to work.

10       Q.    Yeah.

11       A.    Everybody's going to have that Hawthorne effect and --

12       Q.    Yeah.

13       A.    -- you know, they're going to do the perfect flight  
14 possible.

15       Q.    Sure.

16       A.    So the union's point of view was why don't you take  
17 somebody from the field, a line pilot, like me, and send them so  
18 at least there's a little more acceptance, you know. Or I can  
19 even understand -- you know, training instructors are bound by  
20 ridged, you know, guidelines, but I can understand if a guy says,  
21 listen, I have this -- there's only way to go into that hospital  
22 because of this, this, and this and, therefore, under 300 feet, I  
23 cannot maintain a less than 200 feet rate of descent, which is  
24 what the book tells me to do. I can understand that, you know.  
25 So I think this round of observations have actually included a lot

1 of line pilots and senior captains out there to go out and do  
2 those observations.

3 FOQA is trials stages right now. They're going to put  
4 the equipment on 10. But our position in the union is that before  
5 we actually get going on FOQA on a full-time, real-time basis, we  
6 need to have an ironclad agreement so that it's not misused by the  
7 company.

8 Q. How's the safety department of the company?

9 A. I think it's stretched. I think there's a lot of --  
10 it's a huge company. I mean, if you just look at the pilots we've  
11 acquired from Omni, we probably have around 1200 pilots now and I  
12 think 300-plus bases spread across 46-plus states, you know. I  
13 don't think -- we've got one director, now two safety managers,  
14 and three regional safety directors across the region. I don't  
15 think it's enough. I think that they need to, either at the local  
16 level or -- you know, hire some more people, you know. So --

17 Q. How do they affect the operations of a pilot's actions?

18 A. The safety guys, or actually the safety department, I  
19 think, makes recommendations to operations that this is what we  
20 found and this is what we need to change, and I think it's up to  
21 operations to make that change, which in turn affects -- if it's  
22 something that's very critical, they'll send out a safety alert or  
23 a safety bulletin and that is -- you have to obey that or -- but  
24 if something comes out on the ASAP that the pilots feel that this  
25 has to be done in this way to make it better, it may or may not --

1 operations may or may not, you know, accept that. Then --

2 Q. What would be a safety alert? Can you describe it?

3 A. It's just a memo that comes from --

4 Q. What's a recent one?

5 A. The most recent one -- gosh, it's -- there hasn't been  
6 one for a long time. Well, there was a couple -- two winters ago,  
7 I think.

8 Q. Well, how about the one from the -- or the La Monte  
9 accident?

10 A. Yes, yes. The La Monte accident would be a good -- it  
11 said don't drain the fuel from the filter, you know, drain it from  
12 where it's supposed to be drained. That -- something like that  
13 which affects flight safety would come out as a safety alert.

14 A safety bulletin would be like we had a fire in the  
15 aircraft because they put heaters in there. You know, in the  
16 winter the aircraft sit out on the pad. You need to have a heater  
17 to keep the meds warm, the fluids, the -- so some aircraft had a  
18 short circuit and there's a big fire. It melted the whole heater.  
19 So then they'll send out a bulletin saying you need to replace  
20 these every year and make sure the wires don't have, you know --  
21 so that kind of thing, so --

22 Q. How would you characterize pay for pilots?

23 A. Well, I could always make more money, if that's what  
24 you're asking. I think it's improved ever since the union came  
25 in, to be honest.

1 Q. Uh-huh. Good.

2 A. I mean, there was a significant jump in starting  
3 salaries, as well as along the way. The senior guys actually were  
4 making -- starting to make some real money.

5 Q. When did the union come in?

6 A. 2005.

7 Q. And what was the vote? I mean, how --

8 A. It was like 50 percent for a union -- 55 for a union and  
9 45. So it was a pretty narrow thing. And so, yes, so the  
10 salaries have improved, but I think there's room for improvement  
11 given the financial health of the company. I mean, I don't think  
12 we want the airline pilot salaries, but by the same token, our  
13 counterparts in the Gulf of Mexico make more, you know. So --  
14 but, you know, I can see the company's views that this is not the  
15 Gulf of Mexico. We don't make, you know, money out of oil and  
16 petroleum.

17 Q. How does the pay compare to other EMS operations?

18 A. We are actually on the higher side for that, and our  
19 benefits are also good. So I think, by and large, it's a good  
20 lifestyle in that respect.

21 Q. How's morale?

22 A. Pilots' morale?

23 Q. Yeah.

24 A. I think there is a certain amount of contentment, if you  
25 will. A lot of the pilots have chosen to be in EMS because they

1 wanted to move closer to their hometown or get a job. Because EMS  
2 is considered, you know, the retirement job, so to speak. You  
3 know, if -- you don't fly too much and you end up being close to  
4 home and, you know -- so a lot of pilots do this out of choice and  
5 they're content, but on the other side of the coin, I do see that  
6 as the company grows, you know, pilots are kind of, you know,  
7 feeling the fact that -- they come from smaller companies where  
8 there's a little more close knit -- not -- there's a lot of layers  
9 of management we have to deal with, so that can get frustrating at  
10 times. The shortage, the perennial shortage of, you know, pilots  
11 across the board has always -- I mean, nobody complains because  
12 everybody is making money. I go and work shifts on some other  
13 base, I get time and a half and I'm happy because I'm making more  
14 money, but after a while, it just gets a little old.

15 Q. I see. How are relations with the FAA?

16 A. For the pilot, I think, at the pilot level it depends on  
17 individual FSDOs, you know, if you have a good relationship with  
18 the FSDO that's there. As far as the certificate holding office  
19 in Denver, I don't think -- you know, pilots always complain about  
20 the FAA. You know, it's like they'll always make cracks about,  
21 you know, if I'm not happy, you're not -- I mean, I'm not happy  
22 until you're not happy. That's, you know, that's the FAA's motto.

23 So, but by and large I think the FAA -- there's -- I  
24 think the company gives us that buffer, you know. They keep the  
25 FAA off our backs, if you will, but --

1 Q. How often do you see FAA inspectors?

2 A. Once in 3 months or so. At least from our local FSDO,  
3 we get one visit from the maintenance inspector or the operations  
4 inspector once 3 months. Every now and then, somebody will come  
5 down from Denver, but it's -- the last time he came, it was a year  
6 and a half ago, so --

7 Q. Uh-huh. I wanted to walk through the accident flight --

8 A. Sure.

9 Q. -- any insights from being a line pilot or being in the  
10 company. And I guess the first thing would be when the pilot --  
11 okay, I have a new aircraft is now coming on line and you have to  
12 change it over. Would the pilot have occasion to check the fuel  
13 in that? What do you --

14 A. Absolutely. I think -- we did that exact same thing a  
15 week ago. We had 101 at our base as a relief ship. Our aircraft  
16 was converted for immediate training. So that Saturday when I  
17 ferried 101 to St. Joe, we had done exactly the same thing. We  
18 swapped back into our shift. Again, the instructor who was there  
19 had, you know, just left it as it is. He didn't fuel it up or  
20 anything.

21 But in our base, we go through a checklist as to say,  
22 you know, have all of the items been transferred from one to the  
23 other, you know, things like oxygen bottles. And the 101 may come  
24 with another one, and so you put your own one in there, so you  
25 need to replace that, you know. Publications. And every night

1 when both aircraft are there, the night pilot closes out both the  
2 log books, both the DFLs, make sure both documents are, you know,  
3 loaded on the 411.

4 Q. Okay.

5 A. So, I think it's not -- how do I say this? It's not --  
6 it's unusual for somebody to have missed the fuel part completely.  
7 Let me just put it that way. I mean, that would imply -- if there  
8 was some urgency, I mean, if the aircraft had just been handed  
9 over, you know, what, 2:30 or 3:00, and then they said 3:15 you've  
10 got to call, now I can understand. There's some -- some things  
11 will get missed. But if you have a 2-hour window or a 2-1/2-hour  
12 window before you swap and there's no flight, I can't see how it's  
13 possible.

14 Q. And was the pilot required to sign the flight log?

15 A. Yes.

16 Q. And I think you pointed out, actually --

17 A. Yeah, yeah.

18 Q. -- that he did not. What does that mean that he did  
19 not?

20 A. Two things: he forgot to preflight the aircraft  
21 completely or didn't preflight the aircraft, or he just forgot to,  
22 you know -- he did the preflight at some point, but in his mind,  
23 he had already signed a DFL, so he thought he had signed the DFL.

24 Q. Okay.

25 A. But --

1 Q. And then does he have to file -- when -- does the  
2 company check the signatures, or --

3 A. Eventually, he would have signed it. I mean, if nothing  
4 had happened, he would have gone back to base and, you know, said,  
5 oh, I forgot to sign this thing. You know, he would have signed  
6 it and that would have been that.

7 Q. So I presume when he'd hand off to the next pilot or at  
8 least he would have said --

9 A. Yeah. You are right, yeah.

10 Q. Okay. But it was unusual?

11 A. Yeah.

12 Q. All right. Then when the pilot started the mission and  
13 he takes off, he reports that he has 2 hours of fuel.

14 A. Um-hum.

15 Q. To me, you've got the fuel right in front of you --

16 A. Yeah.

17 Q. -- and you can read that.

18 A. Yeah.

19 Q. Can you help me understand that?

20 A. I can't really because it's airmanship 101. I mean,  
21 basically, you make sure you have the flight -- the fuel for the  
22 flight. And there is a lot of -- like you -- there is a culture  
23 at the base to keep X amount of fuel and that becomes a habit,  
24 definitely, you know, that you keep calling off the same fuel.  
25 But, I mean, at some point, he should have looked at the gauge



1 during the -- you mean during the start-up or during -- before he  
2 called off the flight? At least when he's calling off the fuel  
3 that I've got 2 hours, and, you know, a quick glance inside would  
4 have not -- you know, he would have picked up the --

5 Q. In launching, is there a checklist item to check the  
6 fuel as well?

7 A. Yes. There's a -- in the start-up the process, you  
8 know, when you start -- it says turn the booster pumps on, check  
9 for fuel quantity.

10 Q. Uh-huh. And he reported then -- subsequently reported  
11 that part way en route to the hospital, he realized that the other  
12 -- that he was in the wrong aircraft, he confused the aircrafts  
13 and the fuel state.

14 A. Yeah.

15 Q. What are his options at that point?

16 A. Turn around and go back.

17 Q. Why is that?

18 A. I think for all the other issues Air Methods might have  
19 about, you know, being very controlling or, you know, if they come  
20 off as very punitive to the pilots, this is one thing they will  
21 never do. If you miss a flight or divert or drop a flight for  
22 some reason, and if the reason is good enough, I mean, there isn't  
23 anything Air Methods is going to do. They're not going to say,  
24 oh, you missed the revenue flight, so, you know, you're on  
25 suspended -- a day's suspension or you need to make a trip to

1 Denver to talk to the chief pilot. I mean, these are all  
2 escalations and, eventually, you might have to do that at some  
3 point, but I have never had anybody, any manager question me.  
4 I've had issues with weight. I've landed up somewhere and they've  
5 said the patient is 380 pounds and I've said, sorry, can't  
6 transport. I go back and send in a report and there's no  
7 questions asked.

8 Q. Well, but in this case, this was something that was  
9 related to preflight. There are procedures he could have  
10 followed, so it could be seen as negative to him.

11 A. Right, and I --

12 Q. Would there be repercussions because of that?

13 A. Sure. Like I said, because of his less than a year with  
14 the company, he was probably in a state where he wanted -- he had  
15 some performance anxiety. He had to show, you know, show that he  
16 was doing a good job. The company had been nice enough to give  
17 him a transfer of his choice. But as a guy who's been there a  
18 while now, I can tell you that if he had turned around at that  
19 point, nothing would have happened to him. If they had landed at  
20 Bethany, he could have told the chief, or whoever: Hey, I'm not  
21 familiar with Bethany. I realized I didn't have the fuel, and I  
22 landed thinking I'll fly over to Bethany Airport, but guess what?  
23 There's no Jet-A there, so I need the fuel truck.

24 No questions asked. And at some point even after  
25 picking up the patient, if he got the low level on and he had

1 said, you know, guys, we're done; I'm going to land on this road;  
2 you guys will drive the patient by road, he would have gotten into  
3 a little bit of trouble at that stage, but, again, he would still  
4 have kept his job, in all probability. So I think what I'm trying  
5 to say is that his inexperience with the company and, you know,  
6 his anxiety to not get a black mark, if you will, you know,  
7 probably made him take that decision to try and push it.

8 Q. In the first case, when he has just started out for the  
9 -- for Bethany and realizes and comes back --

10 A. Um-hum.

11 Q. -- could he still have done the mission or not? What  
12 would the procedure have been?

13 A. He would have delayed the mission by maybe an hour. And  
14 sometimes you can do that too, you know. I've had many occasions  
15 to tell the receiving -- or the sending hospital that we can't do  
16 the flight now because of X, Y, and Z, we've got weather, we've  
17 got maintenance, but I can do it after an hour if you're willing  
18 to wait. And sometimes the hospital will say, okay, we'll wait,  
19 you know, or they'll say, okay, then, you know, we'll send the  
20 patient by ground or we'll try and get another service in or  
21 whatever. He would have -- I mean, revenue is important. I can  
22 understand that, but I don't think it's that, you know, critical  
23 to the point that you push a bad situation like this to the point  
24 that it'll kill people, so --

25 Q. Was he on a probation period at that time?

1 A. Six months is the probation, so I think --

2 Q. So he was in.

3 A. -- he was off his probation period, so --

4 Q. Uh-huh. Okay. When he's on the ground at Bethany now.  
5 He has a turn around -- the medical people have gone. He talks to  
6 flight service, to flight following, and confesses.

7 A. Uh-huh.

8 Q. He says I made a mistake.

9 A. Uh-huh.

10 Q. And to me, he would have benefited from some other pilot  
11 to talk to, or --

12 A. Sure.

13 Q. Who could he have talked to?

14 A. Well, I don't think we are programmed to call OCC right  
15 now at this stage. I mean, OCC --

16 Q. Why is that?

17 A. OCC kind of initiates the contact --

18 Q. I see.

19 A. -- in terms of they're watching the big picture here.  
20 They've got this big map of the United States and they see these  
21 little dots, aircraft flying all over, and they see one dot which  
22 represents my aircraft heading towards weather, so they will  
23 initiate a phone call. They'll call my communications center and  
24 say just tell LifeNet 1-2 that he's heading for weather, you know,  
25 he needs to check, or whatever. So they will initiate the call,

1 but -- and there are times when I -- you know, if I am sitting at  
2 a place which has no weather reporting and, you know, I'm  
3 suspicious about the weather around, I might call. I haven't done  
4 it, but I know a pilot who has done that. He might call OCC and  
5 say, hey, I have to go from here to there; I don't have any  
6 weather information here --

7 Q. Uh-huh. I see.

8 A. -- so what's the weather like? And they will help him  
9 out. They'll say this is the weather; your route looks good or  
10 bad or you need to go somewhere else. But it's not routine to  
11 call OCC and ask for help in terms of, you know -- not -- maybe  
12 for weather, but not for anything else, you know. Hey, I've got  
13 maintenance issues, what should I do? Never happen.

14 Q. It never happen?

15 A. Yeah. And at the communications center, the guys who  
16 are helping us out with flight following, they're not supposed to  
17 be -- they're receiving information and, you know, accordingly  
18 acting on it, but they'll go by what we tell them, what our  
19 decisions are, and they do not have the training or the  
20 wherewithal or the authority, in fact, to actually, you know, say  
21 don't do this, this way.

22 Q. Is there anyone else he could have called?

23 A. He could have called -- good question. He could have  
24 called a lead pilot at that stage.

25 Q. Uh-huh. How often do pilots do that?

1           A.    I do that a lot, you know, and not for, you know, help  
2 to get out of a situation, but I've landed sometimes and I've said  
3 I can't go any farther and there's a snowstorm coming. So I'll  
4 call my lead pilot and say, hey, I screwed up. I took this  
5 flight. I have landed in this place and there's a snowstorm  
6 coming. First off, I'll secure the aircraft, but come and get me,  
7 you know.

8                        So he could have called a lead pilot and said, what do I  
9 do in a situation like this? But for that, he would have had to  
10 go past and accept the fact that he had actually got himself into  
11 a tight spot to ask for help, you know. And maybe his background  
12 in this case, you know, as an Army pilot, his new -- I mean, his  
13 relatively short time with the company was all kind of working  
14 against him in this case of, you know, I'd like to find the way  
15 out myself; I -- there's nobody I can call.

16                       His lead pilot, incidentally, was working at Cherokee on  
17 this day. He was covering a shift in Cherokee, so he wasn't even  
18 in the area. But, you know, he probably had a few more months  
19 than him in the area. He could have probably either given him the  
20 right advice or said do what you want, you know, that kind of  
21 thing.

22           Q.    I see. So it's not -- you know, I see, so he wouldn't  
23 be able to help with area information --

24           A.    Yeah.

25           Q.    -- probably to a great extent?

1 A. Yeah.

2 Q. Uh-huh. Then, okay, now he's flying and hoping to get  
3 to the hospital or to the airport --

4 A. Yes.

5 Q. -- and he loses his engines. What's his plan or what --

6 A. If he -- I mean, there's no way out. He has to do an  
7 autorotation and if -- he had plenty of places to put the aircraft  
8 down. You know, the fields are all around this track, so he  
9 should have been -- he should, I mean, if indeed his light was on  
10 for whatever duration of time, at the back of his mind, he would  
11 have to be thinking that at some point I'll have to do an  
12 autorotation. And I kind of agree with someone who said there  
13 that he shouldn't have been descending. He should have just held  
14 his height, 500 feet, whatever, all the way to right on top of the  
15 airport, then done an autorotation -- you know, a maneuver, not  
16 necessarily taking the engine out, but done that maneuver right  
17 down to the taxiway so that at least he was in the mode if his  
18 engine quit suddenly. You know, you get what I'm saying? As if  
19 it -- so --

20 Q. Okay.

21 UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER: I'm sorry to interrupt. I just  
22 want to let you guys know that we're in the simulator building in  
23 the classroom. So whenever you're done, just let me know and I'll  
24 come back and take you guys there, so --

25 MR. BRENNER: Oh.

1 UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER: We're not in the conference room.

2 MR. SILLIMAN: We're over --

3 UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER: In the simulator building in one  
4 of the downstairs classrooms --

5 MR. SILLIMAN: Okay.

6 UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER: -- which I don't think you've  
7 seen. So just let me know and I'll come --

8 MR. SILLIMAN: Okay.

9 UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER: -- I'll come get you guys.

10 MR. SILLIMAN: All right.

11 UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER: Sorry to interrupt.

12 MR. BRENNER: Okay.

13 MR. THOMAS: I mean, he would have been in that mode to  
14 be ready for an autorotation. That's the only option at that  
15 stage.

16 BY DR. BRENNER:

17 Q. Should he have done a precautionary landing?

18 A. He -- I mean, that should have been done when the light  
19 came on. What I'm saying, if he had pushed it to the point where  
20 he was a couple of minutes away from an engine failure due to fuel  
21 exhaustion, I think he should have been more ready to do an  
22 autorotation or started the stall (indiscernible) when the light  
23 came on and at 15 minutes, he would have said, no, we're not even  
24 close so I'm going to use the next 3 minutes to do a regular  
25 normal hover landing at someplace safe and you guys take the



1 patient by ground, you know. So --

2 Q. What would have been the repercussions?

3 A. In this particular case, if he had actually landed up,  
4 you know, in such a situation, I would imagine that he would have  
5 had a chat with the chief pilot, you know. He would have had to  
6 go to Denver and explain his decision making.

7 Q. Uh-huh. How he got in that situation basically?

8 A. Yeah.

9 Q. Okay.

10 A. Why did you do this? I mean, essentially, so many  
11 faults along the way, and at that stage he's done so many things  
12 wrong that, you know, I would assume that he would have probably  
13 not been with the company much longer then.

14 Q. I see. What if he --

15 A. But --

16 Q. What if he had landed at the airport and refueled and  
17 taken that path, what would have been the repercussions then?

18 A. Honestly, if nobody said anything, nobody would ever  
19 have been the wiser. I mean, he could have filed an ASAP and we  
20 would have gotten to know about it, but we would not have known  
21 where it happened. But we would have probably not accepted the  
22 report because it's at a point -- from Bethany onwards, it is a  
23 deliberate disregard for safety. And that's one of the  
24 disqualifiers for an ASAP report is that you can inadvertently  
25 make a mistake, you can inadvertently do something and say --

1 inadvertently break a regulation, but if you do it deliberately,  
2 we do not accept the report. So if he didn't file an ASAP, didn't  
3 tell anybody, and probably the crew would have been, oh, okay, you  
4 knew what you were doing, you -- and he would have said, yeah,  
5 look, I told you we would make it to the airport and -- I mean,  
6 that's my gut feeling. I don't think he would have gone and  
7 confessed to anybody and said --

8 Q. Sure.

9 A. -- here's what all I did. I mean, in his mind, I'm sure  
10 he would have been I'm never going to do this again; that was  
11 stupid. And I can guarantee you, if he had lived through that,  
12 for the rest of his life he would have been watching a fuel gauge  
13 like a hawk. But, unfortunately, he did not make it, you know,  
14 so --

15 Q. And, similarly, if he had landed at the hospital and  
16 then offloaded the patient and then waited 4 hours for a fuel  
17 truck --

18 A. He would have been in trouble then because getting a  
19 fuel truck to Liberty Hospital would have involved management  
20 getting into the act, and --

21 Q. I see.

22 A. -- then there would have been questions: Oh, you went  
23 all this way and you can't fly to the airport? So what kind of  
24 fuel are you sitting there with? What happened to your FAA  
25 reserve? You know, so --

1 MR. BRENNER: Jim, do you have any questions?

2 MR. SILLIMAN: No. Actually, those are -- I think you  
3 covered it, everything I can think of. That's very, very helpful  
4 and very thoughtful.

5 BY DR. BRENNER:

6 Q. Anything else we should discuss that we haven't?

7 A. I mean, if you're going to make recommendations -- I'm  
8 sure you are.

9 Q. Yes.

10 A. A little more -- I would recommend to the company that  
11 there should be a little -- I mean, I'm going to do that in my  
12 report as well from the union side -- that there should be a  
13 little more supervision at the local levels. I mean, most of the  
14 time, there is because the lead pilots these days are pretty  
15 senior guys and stuff like that. But there are bases that have  
16 new hires coming on, and so a little more supervision at the local  
17 level, I mean, hands on, not just sending schedules or turning in  
18 the payroll. I mean, making policy decisions, to say, okay, if we  
19 have got a swap in aircraft, we are going to follow this  
20 checklist.

21 Now, I would expect a lead pilot to do that, say, okay,  
22 we've got a new aircraft, here's what the mechanic should be  
23 doing, here's what you, the duty pilot, should be doing, and  
24 here's the checklist: Make sure it has got fuel, the oxygen is  
25 ready for a medical flight; make sure the documents are all

1 squared away, and then only be ready to go back in service.

2           So I think that kind of direction was lacking in this  
3 base and that would be a -- I mean, in the absence of a lead pilot  
4 or a senior lead pilot, the area aviation manager is supposed to  
5 be the supervisor for the bases. Unfortunately, the area aviation  
6 manager can have up to 18 bases to supervise.

7           Q.    How about the one responsible for St. Joe?

8           A.    He has 18 bases --

9           Q.    I see.

10          A.    -- and 66 pilots to look at -- 60 pilots to look at.  
11 And, I mean, while he may not drop any balls in the process, I  
12 mean, he may get them training scheduled on time and he may get  
13 their ground school scheduled on time. I think the day-to-day  
14 cultural issues at the base is only known to people who are  
15 working right there, you know.

16          Q.    Where is he based?

17          A.    He is -- the guy who was the area manager when the  
18 accident took place was Randy Vandenhul.

19          Q.    Yeah.

20          A.    He was based -- he was living in Lincoln. The current  
21 one -- there's been a change -- he lives in Chicago. So --

22          Q.    So limited local knowledge --

23          A.    Yeah, limited local knowledge. It's kind of left to the  
24 bases to run their base and we in the union appreciate that  
25 autonomy because we want to make our schedules; we want to do it

1 the way we want to, but there are some times when you do need some  
2 help, you know, we need some supervision. That would be a  
3 recommendation that I would make.

4 And, I guess, scheduling. I mean, I don't -- I  
5 understand he was not -- he had come after a break, rested and  
6 feeling good and everything, but the man was commuting 11 hours to  
7 Rapid City, you know, coming back, working, going back, you know.  
8 So, I -- legal, it's legal obviously, because according to the  
9 FARs, the way you read it, I can do 77 days at a stretch, and then  
10 have 13 days of 24 hours off and I'm legal, you know, under the  
11 regulations. But do you want a guy to be doing -- well, 77 is an  
12 exaggeration. I don't think anybody in this company would make  
13 you do that. But they really want a guy to be, you know -- yeah,  
14 the management likes it because there's a warm body filling an  
15 empty seat and the shift is covered. The pilots like it because  
16 they're getting time and a half. So there's really no downside to  
17 it, but as a safety guy, I see the downside.

18 I see the -- I know I have worked -- not out of choice,  
19 more out of necessity, I worked 21, 20 days at a stretch and I  
20 know I'm no use to my family in those 21 days and I'm probably no  
21 use as an EMS, alert, oriented, awake EMS pilot most of those  
22 days. So I don't know if that's a good thing or not, but I guess  
23 that -- you know, I don't know if management wants to get into  
24 those nitty-gritties and say, you know, we can do this more than  
25 that many days and stuff. They wouldn't want to because the union

1 won't let them, probably.

2           But by the same token, I think either the lead pilot or  
3 the area manager should be there saying, oh, wait a minute, you  
4 worked 7 days here, you're going to be driving, working 5 days  
5 there, driving back and working another 7 days. I know the money  
6 is good, but tell you what, take a week off, week break, and then  
7 we'll talk it about next month. I -- that's my personal feeling.  
8 I mean, if I was the area manager, I would be doing that.

9           Q. We're considering -- NTSB might make a recommendation  
10 for the OCC to play a role.

11          A. Right.

12          Q. And one definition of it, and apparently one of the  
13 companies that was acquired had this definition, is that the OCC,  
14 when you get past a certain risk level, they share the  
15 responsibility for the launch decision.

16          A. Right.

17          Q. And in this case, I feel like when the pilot confessed,  
18 he was looking for advice and what he needed was someone outside  
19 of the situation to say, son, we don't need this money --

20          A. Uh-huh.

21          Q. -- you park that thing -- something like that. That's  
22 what he -- I think that's he wanted to hear. That's what he was  
23 thinking, but on his own as a new person, he was hesitant to do  
24 it.

25          A. Right.

1 Q. So I'm thinking the OCC, 24 hours a day, you can get a  
2 pilot --

3 A. Yeah.

4 Q. -- on there and get a second opinion --

5 A. Yeah.

6 Q. -- and by second opinion who has authority, in fact. He  
7 can --

8 A. I would agree with you --

9 Q. I mean, is that reasonable, you know?

10 A. Yeah, I would agree with you except that it is all  
11 dependent on the pilot telling somebody my risk assessment is --  
12 we have alphabets for that -- my risk assessment is Charlie even  
13 though it's a beautiful weather day; this is my first day back,  
14 but my risk assessment is Charlie because I don't have enough  
15 fuel. Now, he has to make that first step. You see where I'm --

16 Q. Sure.

17 A. -- going with that, you know?

18 Q. I see.

19 A. OCC has no real --

20 Q. Uh-huh.

21 A. -- time, you know, data link to see how much fuel he's  
22 got.

23 Q. Yeah, no (indiscernible) I guess.

24 A. So --

25 Q. But he did that. He confessed --

1 A. He confessed on the phone to that guy --

2 Q. Yes.

3 A. -- and I'm wondering if the company will now start  
4 empowering these people. Because --

5 Q. No, not the flight following because they don't have any  
6 aviation background. They can't judge it.

7 A. Right. So maybe they'll want to --

8 Q. But maybe OCC.

9 A. Yeah.

10 Q. Okay. Just to --

11 A. So -- or pass that information to OCC and say, hey, you  
12 know --

13 Q. Yeah, yeah.

14 A. -- what should we do with this?

15 Q. Or encourage the pilots --

16 A. Yeah.

17 Q. -- to call OCC.

18 A. Yeah.

19 Q. Maybe the pilot was --

20 A. Absolutely, yeah.

21 Q. -- on the phone, was available for you, you know, to  
22 consult on his facts. All right, I think that covers --

23 MR. SILLIMAN: Yeah, and then we've got to get over  
24 there and --

25 (Whereupon, the interview was concluded.)



CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the attached proceeding before the

NATIONAL TRANSPORTATION SAFETY BOARD

IN THE MATTER OF:           AIR METHODS CORPORATION  
                                  LIFENET HELICOPTER ACCIDENT  
                                  AUGUST 26, 2011  
                                  NEAR MOSBY, MISSOURI  
                                  Interview of Brian Thomas

DOCKET NUMBER:            CEN11FA599

PLACE:

DATE:                        October 13, 2011

was held according to the record, and that this is the original,  
complete, true and accurate transcript which has been compared to  
the recording accomplished at the hearing.

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Karen M. Galvez  
Transcriber