

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: DENNIS McCALL

Air Methods Corporation
7301 South Peoria
Englewood, Colorado

Thursday,
December 8, 2011

The above-captioned matter convened, pursuant to notice.

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I N T E R V I E W

INTERVIEW OF DENNIS McCALL

BY DR. BRENNER:

Q. Dennis, what's your full name, just for the record?

A. Dennis Ralph McCall.

Q. Okay. And what's your title here?

A. Chief pilot.

Q. And how long have you been working for the company?

A. Since 2003.

Q. And what's your background, just briefly, in aviation?

A. Briefly, my aviation background is I started with Air Methods in 2003 as a pilot out in California --

Q. Oh.

A. -- flying at one of the Mohave Bases. I quickly moved into the lead pilot position. From there, I moved to a Victorville base, where I was the aviation manager for the area. In 2006, opportunity came up here in Denver to move over here, so I came up as the compliance manager and that position was -- because of the operational control issues that came out of the '06 NTSB hearings and complying with the --

Q. I see.

A. -- the checklist and, of course, out of that, came the operational control center that I was involved in to develop that to what it is. Before that, before I was with Air Methods, I flew law enforcement in California for 11 years, and before that, was a

1 flight instructor. I've been flying since 1987.

2 Q. Are you fixed wing or rotor or --

3 A. Rotor.

4 Q. How many hours have you got?

5 A. A little over 14,000.

6 Q. My God. How much of that's in EMS?

7 A. The last 6 years; probably 1,000 hours of it.

8 Q. Did you know the accident pilot?

9 A. No.

10 Q. How are his credentials compared to other pilots? How
11 does he look?

12 A. Looked fine.

13 Q. Anything special stands out about his background or
14 his --

15 A. Can you be specific about that? I'm not sure what
16 you're asking me.

17 Q. Well, just, I mean, just how would you rate him as a,
18 you know, as a new candidate coming into the company? How does
19 he --

20 A. Oh.

21 Q. What was striking about him?

22 A. There was nothing striking about him and nothing unique
23 or --

24 Q. Um-hum. Why did he transfer to South Dakota?

25 A. I wasn't involved in the transfer. I don't know why he

1 -- that wouldn't come to my level.

2 Q. I see. And why was he working both bases? Does that
3 come to your level?

4 A. No. I don't get involved in the scheduling. With as
5 many pilots -- we have 1,000 pilots and it'd be impossible for me
6 to do that. I do know that a lot of pilots like overtime and it's
7 made available to them through the collective bargaining
8 agreement. It's spelled out exactly how that gets offered and who
9 can claim it and those type of things.

10 Q. I see. What are your responsibilities? Just briefly,
11 if you could.

12 A. The key responsibility is making sure that my pilots are
13 trained, that we're compliant with the regulations. I staff a
14 training department. I'm responsible for the standardization of
15 that training and I have a pretty good cadre of about 66
16 instructors that I manage, as well as writing the general
17 operations manual. I have input into that. But my primary focus
18 is on training of our pilots.

19 Q. And do you know in his case, had he received any
20 discipline, any commendations?

21 A. I don't know the answer to either of the questions.

22 Q. Okay. We'll find it at a different level. In terms of
23 policy, how does a pilot determine the fuel state when he receives
24 an aircraft?

25 A. You would do that during the preflight and that would be

1 determined by looking at the fuel gauge to see what's in there.
2 And in some aircraft, it's possible to visually verify what the
3 fuel is.

4 Q. Um-hum. Is that a checklist item?

5 A. Yes.

6 Q. Is there a written record of that? What do you do?

7 A. Only that he -- there was the daily flight log where
8 they would sign off that they completed the preflight for the day
9 according to the regulations, and part of that is the preflight
10 planning, which means you have the fuel to conduct whatever
11 operation you've been given or offered to you.

12 Q. Now, in this case, the pilot had not signed off the
13 daily log. Why is that?

14 A. Don't know.

15 Q. Why was that? Okay. But it would have been normal to
16 sign it at the time or kind of --

17 A. It would have been.

18 Q. Okay. So -- okay. Then when you start a mission, how
19 do you determine the fuel state?

20 A. When you're offered the mission, you have an idea -- you
21 know where it's at, of course, and you know there's normally some
22 type of standard fuel load -- it differs from base to base -- of
23 what they know they need for their normal operating area. So the
24 first thing you determine, is this within my normal operating
25 area, and if it is, then the fuel, the mission fuel that you

1 normally put in the aircraft and verified earlier should be
2 sufficient. If not, you put more fuel on. But you always -- you
3 know, that's -- you always plan the flight to have -- to be able
4 to complete the entire flight and still have 20 minutes of fuel
5 remaining in the aircraft.

6 Q. Now, I think the policy at St. Joe's was to -- 70
7 percent fuel load for their missions. So is that -- and is that
8 something that's written down or something that's word of mouth or
9 procedures? How do you know that? How --

10 A. That would be local information shared amongst the
11 pilots at the base. And I've heard that 70 percent number at
12 other bases for flying AS-350, so I'm not surprised by that.

13 Q. I did have a question. Now, he did have an aircraft
14 that was the principal aircraft in the morning, and that was -- to
15 our knowledge, that was totally ready to go and prepared, but then
16 he was advised when he came on duty that there was another
17 aircraft that may be coming on later that was going into
18 maintenance, which was the accident aircraft and did come on
19 later, and that that aircraft was low on fuel. We're told that he
20 was briefed on that. Would it have been appropriate at that time
21 to go out and fuel it?

22 A. Just going by if what you say is accurate, and I don't
23 know that it is --

24 Q. Yeah, uh-huh.

25 A. -- yes.

1 Q. Okay. And other than that, I guess, then in the mid-
2 afternoon, the aircraft came out of maintenance and they had to
3 convert over for the mission.

4 A. Right. I learned that from the investigation.

5 Q. Okay. I'm just trying to find out, you know -- so if I
6 understand correctly, the procedure would have been then at that
7 point certainly to check the fuel state. He's now taking on a new
8 aircraft. Is that correct?

9 A. Yes.

10 Q. All right.

11 A. You would preflight the other aircraft. You know, it's
12 not uncommon. What you've described is -- and I ran into this
13 typically. There's two reasons you could have a couple of
14 aircraft at the same base. One is that your aircraft's in
15 maintenance and they keep your base in service by providing you
16 another aircraft. The other times, it could be they're parking
17 one there. They're just -- a place to store it, and you might get
18 asked to move it.

19 So the guidance is if you have another -- you treat each
20 aircraft as a brand new aircraft. In other words, you come in and
21 you take your duty aircraft, get that ready, do all the checks.
22 And if they put you in another one, you start all over again and
23 you treat that one just like the first flight of the day and you
24 do all preflight action on that one as well.

25 Q. Help me out then. We know -- the pilot said -- he got

1 to his first destination and he reported back: "I made a mistake.
2 I took -- I was thinking of a different aircraft. I don't have as
3 much fuel as I thought." How did that happen?

4 A. Don't know. I heard the tapes as well --

5 Q. Yeah.

6 A. -- and that he said -- I think he says that I got
7 halfway here and I realized I didn't have the fuel.

8 Q. Yeah.

9 A. And I have no idea what he was thinking.

10 Q. Well, let me elaborate as a layman on my side. First, I
11 would think that when you accept the aircraft and you know -- you
12 would check the fuel at that point. And then when you lift off, I
13 think he reports how much fuel he has to the flight follower.
14 You're looking at the gauge is the second one. So, it -- as a
15 layman, I would think that somehow it slipped up there and that
16 only later did he realize what's going on.

17 A. Well, that's certainly possible because we know from the
18 evidence that he didn't have two hours of fuel on board --

19 Q. Yeah.

20 A. -- and he acknowledged that when he was talking to the
21 communications center. So I don't know why he would have called
22 off with two hours of fuel when he only had -- well, I'm not sure
23 what he had in there, actually.

24 Q. Are the fuel gauges reliable?

25 A. I believe so.

1 Q. What's the function of the risk assessment that the
2 pilot performs before the mission?

3 A. The function of that risk assessment is to give the
4 pilot a systematic way of identifying risk, things they may not
5 have thought about, and to come up with mitigation strategies.
6 That's what the goal of that is.

7 Q. Well, in his case, I think he came up as a Beta, I
8 think, from the tapes.

9 A. I think so, B.

10 Q. A "B". What's that mean to you?

11 A. What a B means is that -- that's a pretty low risk,
12 actually. And the B would be if -- different aircraft, new crew.
13 There could be several things put in there. Commonly, commonly,
14 because of the history of EMS accidents, it's focused around
15 weather issues and weather threats. But I think you would find a
16 lot of B's, C's.

17 Q. And what are the high risk areas?

18 A. By areas, do you mean locations in the country?

19 Q. No. What would be a high -- what would be one that
20 would call for strong mitigation attention?

21 A. It would be late in the shift and night and weather is
22 approaching minimums for our operations. That would be a high-
23 risk value, probably up near a D. D is the end of it.

24 Q. I see. D is the high.

25 A. But a B, for example, if you're -- the FAA has a list

1 that tells you where the mountainous terrain is in the country.
2 Automatically, if you're in mountainous terrain, you have -- it's
3 a B. You start at a B. You can't start at an A.

4 Q. I see.

5 A. So that B is not uncommon for that reason.

6 Q. I see. I think in his case, he may have been new with
7 the company or less than a year with the company, new with that
8 aircraft, new to the area, I believe.

9 A. He was new to the company. I think he'd been less than
10 a year. That's true.

11 Q. At St. Joseph's less than a year, and, I think, the
12 A-Star less than a year as well.

13 A. Less than a year in A-Star as well.

14 Q. So --

15 A. I think he had -- and it was over 100 hours in the
16 aircraft, 100 -- maybe 130 comes to mind, 134, and over a
17 relatively short period of time, I wouldn't consider that -- I'd
18 consider that good, actually.

19 Q. Okay, good. How do you promote a safety culture that
20 encourages pilots to accept only the flight requests that they can
21 do safely, prudently, and legally, and to turn down those they
22 cannot?

23 A. You just used a phrase almost verbatim that we use in
24 our basic indoc to our pilots. And if you were here on Tuesday,
25 we had -- the director of operations and myself, we address every

1 single new hire pilot, every one of them. And during that 4
2 hours, this is exactly what we talk about, and we tell them you
3 have to meet three conditions: It has to be safe, legal, and
4 prudent, and we give them numerous examples of what that means and
5 what they can do to mitigate, that there's no one flight that we
6 need to take so bad that you need to go. We don't push weather.
7 We don't take risks. We don't fly on every aircraft. And that's
8 what they get from us.

9 Q. Uh-huh. And you said it's a 4-hour segment in the basic
10 indoctrination?

11 A. Yes.

12 Q. Okay.

13 A. We bring them all here for basic indoc.

14 Q. Could you give me a couple of examples?

15 A. Of?

16 Q. Using the class.

17 A. Yes. We talk about -- we have an example. There was an
18 accident we had in Tupelo, Mississippi and the pilot -- and this
19 was a sage pilot. He's been around for a long time. Matter of
20 fact, he's to the point of approaching retirement age. He is well
21 liked. He's well placed in the community. He has a church. I
22 mean, that's all the things that -- nothing unusual. Everyone
23 loved this guy. Never even scratched the paint on the aircraft.

24 He goes out to do a scene call and he lands and he's
25 kind of landed in a culvert. Culvert's my word for it, but it's a

1 ditch in the ground, sort of. While they're bringing the patient
2 up, they crack the chin bubble on the aircraft. Well, the point
3 there is the aircraft became unairworthy. You don't fly it.
4 Well, he made the right decision. He grounded the aircraft. The
5 patient went by ground ambulance and he waited for the mechanic to
6 come and fix the aircraft.

7 The mechanic came. They can do a simple repair in the
8 field. Did the proper paperwork, but now some weather had moved
9 in. The weather was getting bad. And we couched this in how to
10 handle self-induced pressure, not external pressure, but the ones
11 that the pilots put on themselves. So the mechanic leaves and the
12 pilot is there and a state patrol comes up and notices what's
13 going on. He looks at the weather and advises the pilot that, you
14 know, if it rains, right where that aircraft is, it's going to
15 flood. The aircraft's probably going to go under water.

16 So the pilot starts thinking about this because -- we
17 know some of this because he talked to the mechanic. He called
18 him and said, hey, here's what I'm going to do. It's going to
19 flood right here. There's a school down the road I can get to, I
20 think. I'm going to go up and take a look and, if I can, I'm
21 going to fly over there and put the aircraft in that field.

22 He doesn't make it. He takes off and gets into the
23 clouds and goes inverted and kills himself. That's -- so that's
24 one of the examples. And it takes a little bit longer than that
25 in the class because --

1 Q. Sure.

2 A. But we're trying to show that this a sage pilot. This
3 is someone that's been around block, not -- shouldn't be subject
4 to this, has turned down and flights and --

5 Q. He made a good decision earlier.

6 A. Right.

7 Q. Yeah. Is there a written policy that supports this?

8 A. Our safety management system does. Yeah, our safety --

9 Q. There is written guidance to the pilots?

10 A. That tells them to be safe or to --

11 Q. Yeah. Or -- well, yeah, I guess that follows up on the
12 kinds of material you talk about in those 4 hours: safety,
13 prudent, and legal. Is there --

14 A. There's -- I don't know if I'll characterize it as
15 policy. It's a theme and it's the culture we're trying to push.
16 We have documents we put out, like a safety connect, where we put
17 the "There I was" stories. We are continually sharing information
18 we get from AIDMORs. That's a reporting system we have from the
19 field where the pilots -- the medical crews can send us
20 information concerns. So it's put out that way.

21 Q. The St. Joe's ferry has become very competitive in
22 recent years. How do you mitigate competitive pressures, let's
23 say?

24 A. It's out of my sphere of influence. I don't mitigate.
25 I've been at bases like that and, you know, I tried to stay out of

1 those kind of politics and so on.

2 Q. I see.

3 A. I just came to fly the helicopter.

4 Q. If a pilot has to make a launch decision and wants
5 counsel on a -- it's a difficult decision, who do they contact?
6 What's the procedure?

7 A. The procedure, and they're taught this as well in the
8 basic indoc, is you call up your chain of command and you keep
9 calling all the way up to the director of operations office, and
10 then we tell them in the basic indoc class, we say and if that
11 doesn't work, you call Aaron Todd. Call somebody.

12 But the OCC is -- that's our safety net. You can call
13 them, and we tell them in this class and we put this in our
14 General Operations Manual, we post their number and say that that
15 should be your first call. They can get a hold of any of us and
16 they often do.

17 Q. Okay. So the procedure would be call the OCC first.
18 Would you discuss it with OCC or be referred or --

19 A. You would discuss it with the OCC.

20 Q. Okay. And then you'd work up your chain of command. So
21 I guess it'd be the lead pilot and then the, I guess, the area.

22 A. They have the option of calling the lead. I know that
23 some people call the lead pilots. That's fine too. It's good
24 that they're getting a second opinion on what they're -- you know,
25 instead of trying to make a decision if they're having trouble

1 with it by themselves. So, sure, you call and get a second
2 opinion. It could be the lead. Then the next logical would be
3 the area aviation manager, if we're going strictly by the
4 communication lines; then the regional aviation director. Then it
5 will go up to me. If they don't like my answer, they could go to
6 the director of ops. But we tell them, for convenience, and we --
7 and all of the satellite phones on the aircraft, we have the OCC
8 as either the first choice or second choice to make a phone call.

9 Q. Yeah.

10 A. One of them is LifeCom or the other one is us. You --
11 either way, you're going to get to somebody.

12 Q. And there's written guidance that they got?

13 A. Call the OC --

14 Q. Yeah.

15 A. There is a lot of OCC guidance that tells what services
16 we provide, as well as they're given that presentation at basic
17 indoc.

18 Q. How often do the pilots call OCC for --

19 A. I'd have to defer to Leah. But I can tell you just from
20 my experience, how often do I get called? I probably get called
21 every day.

22 Q. Okay.

23 A. Okay.

24 Q. What kind of things?

25 A. It can be things -- one of them that comes to mind is

1 one of our aircraft had made a precautionary landing at an
2 airport. I think it was in -- it was, I think, in Tennessee area.
3 But what had happened was when he made this emergency landing, he
4 was partially blocking an active runway. So the aircraft is
5 unairworthy at that point and the call was to ask me: I've got an
6 airport manager that says I have to move this aircraft. And I
7 told him, no, absolutely not; you can't move that aircraft. It's
8 unairworthy. Leave it right there. And he said, well, they're
9 going to put a chain on it and they're going to tow it out of here
10 if I don't do it. And I said, well, explain to them that, you
11 know, we can't for these reasons and that, you know, they'll be
12 responsible for our aircraft.

13 So that's the kind of thing I get. Some of them are
14 pilots just have a question about, hey, could -- mom wants to ride
15 in the helicopter with the baby, is that okay? Sure. You know,
16 those type of things.

17 Q. How often do you get questions concerning fuel, fuel
18 issues?

19 A. I don't ever recall getting a question on fuel.

20 Q. Why is the operation -- the OCC here and not in Omaha or
21 vice-versa? Why don't you bring those guys here? Why aren't they
22 co-located?

23 A. That makes for a good debate. And I'll tell you the
24 reason why we chose to have it here. We participated in the
25 advisory circular that came out, since we were in the front of all

1 this, and the four tiers that it takes, the different levels of
2 operational control from a small operator, a few aircraft, all the
3 way up to a larger operator. We thought it was important that we
4 have them here because they have immediate access to chief pilot,
5 DO, all the executives. And it's not unusual, the phone just
6 rings real quick and -- you know what, and I can't even think of
7 any real specifics, but it rings a couple times a day. You pick
8 it up, and it's the OCC: Hey, we've got this going on, just want
9 to let you know. As well as our equipment is so important to us,
10 we have our IT staff here. They can immediately respond to
11 problems we have, if we have any.

12 Q. Why not bring Omaha here?

13 A. I'm not against that.

14 Q. Is there an advantage of co-locating them?

15 A. They're different function. I'll tell you what the
16 guidance says, what the information out there says. If you put
17 them together, then you have the flight followers and the
18 operational control, the flight monitor sitting in the same place
19 and that -- the idea is that they would be -- OCC would kind of be
20 the supervisor of the communicators and they would have this
21 little node that would interact with each other. We also realize
22 that that would put all those employees under one manager and it
23 would take away what I'm doing, which is --

24 Q. From the independence.

25 A. The independence of it, exactly. I think that's

1 important because there's -- we have the huge compliance part
2 where we also oversee and monitor all the communication centers to
3 make sure they're doing what they're supposed to be doing,
4 entering flight plans, giving us updates, and those type -- that
5 type of information.

6 Q. And also, in the advisory circular, they talk about OCC
7 sharing the operational control. They talk about -- I have a
8 comment, I believe it's the effect that especially if, for
9 example, the risk assessment reaches a certain level that they
10 share the decision in terms of launching or they routinely have a
11 second person with responsibility over it. Can you --

12 A. Yeah.

13 Q. -- is there a question or what's the thinking? Please
14 disregard --

15 UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER: That's kind of hard to answer.

16 MR. McCALL: What I understanding you're asking is do we
17 have a -- does the OCC -- why is our OCC not involved or have the
18 ability to stop a flight?

19 BY DR. BRENNER:

20 Q. Advisory as opposed to -- yes, consulting or having
21 responsibility.

22 A. When we down the operational control path for the
23 pilots, it was important -- and we set up a two-tier system, we
24 tried to follow the guidance that's in A008, which is the
25 operation specification, and give the pilots that tier 2

1 operational control. We need them to be the decision maker. The
2 reason we do is, just as it's important that the OCC is back here
3 and they're away from it, they don't have any type of operational
4 pressures, that pilot's the one that's right there looking. There
5 are times when we might see weather that looks bad to us, but the
6 pilot in the field --

7 Q. Sure.

8 A. -- I've been on both sides of this --

9 Q. Sure.

10 A. -- it's not. And so, we don't want to make a gray area
11 for the pilot. Do I -- who's initiating this flight, me or them
12 or us? So our decision right now is that we keep that decision at
13 the pilot level. The expert makes the decision ultimately. We
14 provide him with the information and the tools to make the
15 decision.

16 Q. I understand in terms of weather, surely, the local
17 person has an advantage because they can see what the conditions
18 are. But from a layman's viewpoint, looking at this accident, it
19 looks as if here's a case where the pilot is calling in and asking
20 for guidance from someone who can help him out and basically says
21 I made a mistake, what do I do now? Do I, you know -- and flight
22 following couldn't do it. OCC, in principle, maybe could have.
23 So, to me, I could see a recommendation, for example, that OCC
24 should have more responsibility or should share it or have some
25 sort of more of a second role, a second opinion sort of role with

1 more -- would that be a fair recommendation?

2 A. Yes.

3 Q. Why is that?

4 A. Well, why that's a fair recommendation is because what
5 we need is the complete communication loop. And the OCC, while
6 they don't have the ability to tell somebody no, they can get a
7 hold of someone that can tell them no. That does happen.

8 Example. We have in our GOM that if you're requested to
9 do any type of a search and rescue flight that you have to call
10 the OCC. And also, it says in there we don't do search and
11 rescue. So that would be -- that's probably one that we get
12 frequently is the pilot is being offered a flight and can't make
13 the determination whether it's a search and rescue, does this
14 qualify and can we do this? The OCC will listen to that and say
15 hang on one second, and connect them to me or call me at home,
16 call one of us at home --

17 Q. Yeah.

18 A. -- and we will make a decision, no. Or, I've had a few
19 times where they've come into my office and said would you come,
20 please, to look at this aircraft? It looks like he's heading into
21 some really bad weather. And we've called him and we've told him.
22 So I go in there and I look, and then I made the decision, okay,
23 tell them, per the chief, the mission's terminated.

24 Q. Exactly. Someone who can say no, exactly. Yeah.

25 A. Yes. So --

1 Q. And that's -- yeah.

2 A. -- I think in a round about way, Malcolm, we do that.
3 It's just it's not the OCC. They're just sort of the conduits of
4 the information to get it to us.

5 Q. And I guess in this case, it's sad that both the pilot
6 and the flight follower, that neither one of them went into that
7 situation. It's a case where they both understood, they're both
8 trying to do the best they can, but it needed someone to come in
9 from the outside view. What can we do to prevent that in the
10 future? I don't know.

11 A. What could you do?

12 Q. Yeah.

13 A. I mean, I'll address this as like a global issue. A
14 communicator would need sort of a triage type of a checklist they
15 could use and say if this is anything but this, the question's
16 anything but this, this, or this, you know, reference the flight
17 following, then we just hand it off to whatever it is. If they
18 don't have an OCC, it goes up to the certificate management or
19 local management. If you have an OCC, then you could send it up
20 there.

21 Q. Yeah.

22 A. I'm considering those things, obviously.

23 Q. Have there been changes to procedures since this
24 accident, as a result of this accident?

25 A. Yes, there's been a couple. One of them is that we've,

1 through the communications center in Omaha, we've talked to their
2 management and they're teaching their people. They also
3 participate in our safety management system. So, on our monthly
4 meeting, they sit right there and we're all in this big room
5 together and we talked about that and said, look, anything out of
6 the ordinary has to be funneled through the OCC. We have to keep
7 that line open. It's -- just do it. We're on the same phone
8 system. You can transfer the call. And that's -- hindsight's
9 20/20.

10 Q. Well, I'll tell you, that's how we learn from it.

11 In terms of company policy and likely discipline, I'd
12 appreciate your thoughts on it. From the pilot's viewpoint, if he
13 had reported that he had low fuel at that point, I made a mistake,
14 and stopped the flight, what would have been the company's
15 response?

16 A. It would have been an attaboy. Probably would have got
17 a trip out to talk to me, got some more training, but that would
18 have been more of -- it would have been an attaboy.

19 Q. Okay. What if he stopped for fuel with the passenger,
20 then completed the flight, what would have been the company
21 response?

22 A. It depends on what I knew about it. If I knew that it
23 was a critical fuel situation -- well, the response is it's -- we
24 allow for that. We understand. It's rare, but we have written
25 guidance in our GOM that tells you how to do that function. And

1 that's --

2 Q. How to refuel with the passenger?

3 A. Absolutely. And we do that. So we don't take that away
4 from them. That's a tool in the toolbox and it gets used.

5 Q. How often do pilots stop to refuel with passengers?

6 A. I couldn't give you an exact number, but I would say
7 it's not frequent, but it's not an anomaly when it happens. I
8 personally have done it myself when I was flying the line.

9 Q. What was the occasion?

10 A. I typically had long legs where I flew, long mileage
11 where I -- we would go out to some pretty remote areas in the
12 California deserts, maybe have a 120-nautical mile leg coming
13 back. Winds picked up. You know, you took off and you picked up
14 a 40-knot headwind. That changed things. But the contingency was
15 already planned before I left my base, and so we would have fuel
16 waiting for us somewhere, and then I would change the flight plan
17 and say I'm stopping here for fuel.

18 Q. Um-hum, sure. If he delivered the passenger and then
19 stayed at the hospital for a fuel truck to come to refuel then,
20 had not refueled on the way, what would the company response have
21 been?

22 A. Now, being the chief pilot -- and I can speak directly
23 to this -- if you made bad mistakes and then you eventually make a
24 good choice, that good choice is going to save you. There's -- it
25 boils down to training. It boils down to going back and saying,

1 okay, was there a failure in the training? Is there something we
2 didn't cover well enough? Let's go back and figure out what
3 happened here and make sure it doesn't happen again.

4 Q. If he autorotated with the passenger -- ran out fuel and
5 autorotated successfully, what would have been the company
6 response?

7 A. He would have gotten training. And again, we -- well, I
8 had a guy over the weekend who was flying and he was going to pick
9 up the patient, landed in the desert, and struck his -- the tail,
10 damaged the aircraft. There's nothing going to happen to him
11 other than the fact that we're going to do a little bit of a
12 training on him. The aircraft got some damage, but, nevertheless,
13 it wasn't intentional. So there's a lot of things you have to
14 look at. And I -- you're giving me a for instance --

15 Q. Yeah.

16 A. -- and so --

17 Q. I'm trying to get a sense.

18 A. -- I'm really not comfortable speculating on what I
19 would do because it's all really as a case-by-case basis. But I
20 truly believe in the just culture, whether things were
21 intentional, would another person in the same position have done
22 the same thing and got themselves -- I really look at all that.

23 Q. Okay. Compared to industry standards, how is pilot pay?

24 A. We're in the top 75 percent.

25 Q. How's pilot morale?

1 A. I believe it's good.

2 Q. How about the schedules?

3 A. The pilot schedules?

4 Q. Pilot schedules, yeah.

5 A. The pilot schedules -- I'm not sure if I know what
6 you're asking. Are -- do they -- are you asking if the pilots
7 like the schedules?

8 Q. Yeah.

9 A. They come up with the schedules.

10 Q. Oh.

11 A. So, yes, I think they like them. That's part of their
12 collective bargaining agreement is that they will determine days
13 on, days off, and that type of thing --

14 Q. I see.

15 A. -- with input from the company, of course.

16 Q. How are relations with the pilots you know?

17 A. Well.

18 Q. How's the size of the workforce compared to the workload
19 that has to be performed for the pilots side?

20 A. I think it's manageable. You said the pilots --

21 Q. Yeah.

22 A. -- or management to the workforce?

23 Q. No, in terms of workforce, pilot workforce to pilot
24 workload. Do you have enough pilots for the system or --

25 A. I always want more, but I do believe we have enough.

1 Q. How's the turnover rate of pilots?

2 A. That's a question better for Mr. Bassett, but --

3 Q. Sure.

4 A. -- I would say that it's -- I don't know what the number
5 is. I'd have to guess on that. I think it's normal for this
6 industry. Every month we have a basic indoc and there's people
7 sitting in it. So we're always hiring people. We do have some
8 vacancies out there, some open positions, and that's based on --
9 most of that comes from pilots on military leave. We hold their
10 positions for them until they come back, and there's quite a few.
11 We have a lot of military pilots and they've been a great asset to
12 the country, so they use them elsewhere.

13 Q. How's the turnover rate of managers?

14 A. It's low.

15 Q. How's the quality of new hires?

16 A. They're good. We have a -- we get a lot of choices and
17 we pick a few. So it's -- there's a lot of people to pick from,
18 but there's just not -- we're kind of picky. We think we do a
19 good job in who we pick and how we vet people out. Not anybody
20 can come. Our, you know, minimums are right up there with
21 everybody else's.

22 The influx of the military pilots that used to be out
23 there, you don't have it anymore, so, pretty much, everybody's
24 coming from tour operators and those type of things. I'm not
25 saying any one is any better than the other, it's just that it's

1 something I've noticed is that the options between military and
2 civilian trained is -- it's dwindling; very few guys.

3 Q. What are the strengths of the military pilots?

4 A. I believe -- you know, this is a -- I'm only smiling
5 because it's a -- I'm not a military pilot. The other guy is.
6 And so we will play little games with them. During the pilot
7 interview we'll ask them: So you're military trained? I'll ask
8 you that question, so what's better? And, of course, whatever you
9 are is what's better, for the reasons.

10 The military pilot, I think the strengths are they're
11 regimented on how they do things. They are -- they're pretty much
12 they're good aviators or they wouldn't be there; the military
13 would have gotten rid of them. So I feel a little bit comfortable
14 knowing that they've been vetted and done complex missions before.

15 Q. What are the advantages of the civilian pilots?

16 A. The FAA operating in this regulatory environment is -- I
17 think, is big. As well as -- small distinction on how it
18 important it is, is a guy that's flown civilian has always been by
19 themselves in the cockpit and is used to making all those
20 decisions by themselves and I find that, at times, that's a little
21 more helpful.

22 Q. Uh-huh. What's special about the company?

23 A. There's a lot I like about Air Methods, starting with I
24 really truly like their attitude towards safety, their equipment,
25 being innovative. And I'll break those down real quick, is I

1 wouldn't go work for a company -- when I was leaving my -- a
2 previous job to come to Air Methods, safety was important. I
3 always saw their aircraft flying around. I flew with them. They
4 were in good shape. Their pilots seemed to be really -- very well
5 trained, and you want to be part of something like that. And then
6 once I got up here and got into the -- this management level with
7 Aaron Todd, from Paul Tate all the way down through the line, they
8 truly do support safety. A lot of money has been spent. Anybody
9 -- everybody says safety is their number one priority. Nobody
10 would say it's number two. So you can expect that from anybody,
11 but I think they've put their money where their mouth is.

12 Again, there's no financial advantage to opening an
13 operational control center and putting eight people and spending a
14 half-million dollars on software when it's not required. There
15 was no financial incentive to putting TAWS in our aircraft, NTSB
16 recommendation. To NVGs, we're almost 100 percent NVGs. We've
17 been marching ahead doing all these things and that continued
18 support is still there.

19 Now we've taken on the safety management system, which
20 I'll tell you is a huge endeavor. It's huge. And we've exited
21 Level 2 and we hope to exit at Level 3, which means we're in the
22 reactive stage -- I mean, excuse me, the proactive stage and able
23 to start having very positive effects on our flight operations.

24 Q. And Mr. Todd, what -- can you give examples of his
25 attitude towards safety?

1 A. I've sat across from him at meetings before when they're
2 trying to make decisions about spending money and Aaron is quick
3 to say if it's safer, if it's the right way to go, we'll do it,
4 and he has. He led -- Aaron personally led the effort to add all
5 that specialized equipment to the aircraft. There's a lot more
6 too. I mean, weather, we've got XM radio weather on the aircraft.
7 We fly good equipment, a lot of new equipment. We order 25
8 aircraft a year, so it's --

9 Q. All right. How would you characterize the competitive
10 environment of this industry?

11 A. I think it's very competitive.

12 Q. Has it gotten more competitive or less competitive?

13 A. I think it's sort of flattened, is what I think. Where
14 there was a huge expansion over the, you know, 10-year period
15 where everybody was getting into it and, you know, you could --
16 there was helicopters facing each other at the airport, truly.
17 Arizona is a great example of how many EMS helicopters. But I
18 think that because of the economy downturn, the weaker companies
19 have moved, taken their aircraft back out and are doing other
20 things now and there's a little bit of downsizing. And think that
21 that's what we're seeing too. We're really no positive growth
22 other than acquisition of Omni. We've stayed pretty flat.

23 Q. With Mr. Todd, the CEO, what are his strengths?

24 A. Comprehension of issues, big picture. He's obviously
25 very good with the financials for the company. And I think he, as

1 a leader -- and again, I keep going back to our SMS system which
2 he's a part of. He's a part of a lot of the safety committees we
3 have and so on and puts his time and effort into them as well.

4 Q. How much contact do the line employees have with him?

5 A. I wouldn't think very much. I know Aaron tries to get
6 out and he goes in the field, but even for myself, it's -- it'd
7 take a long time, just doing the simple mathematics of 305 bases,
8 how long it would take me to get to each one of them. But I do
9 meet every pilot.

10 Q. What's the safety office do?

11 A. They're all -- right now, what they're doing is they're
12 expanding, expanding exponentially. But they're taking care of a
13 lot of our big programs as far as safety initiatives. They are
14 the facilitators for our SMS system. They are also overseeing our
15 ASAP, MSAP, the Aviation Safety Action Program. They chair those
16 and they do them. We have a person they brought on now to start
17 doing analyticals of our data to see what we can -- what kind of
18 trends we can find out. But they're pretty tightly interwoven
19 within the company. I work very well with them. I spend a lot of
20 time with the safety people, with Ed and with Michael Koenes, and
21 all the rest of them.

22 Q. How are relations with the FAA?

23 A. Good. I think we have a very positive relationship with
24 the Denver FSDO. That's -- when you say FAA, that's what I'm --
25 not the same everywhere.

1 Q. Can you give me an example?

2 A. They also are -- an example of our FAA? Yes. They are
3 participating as well in our safety management system and helping
4 us develop that and helping us move forward with our technologies
5 and innovations and, you know, being a -- they're good advocates
6 for us. They're firm, but they're fair. You know, that's -- they
7 don't give us stuff, but, you know, we feel like we earned it when
8 we get something, but they help us, help us get there.

9 Q. Now, I wanted to ask about the autorotation and
10 autorotation training. Maybe --

11 DR. BRENNER: Jim, maybe -- do you want to pick up on
12 that?

13 MR. SILLIMAN: Yeah.

14 BY MR. SILLIMAN:

15 Q. Dennis, first of all, the -- you said changes to
16 procedures. You said you've made two. One was AirCom, you know,
17 trying to just get anything out of the ordinary sent up to OCC.
18 So more communication to the OCC, it sounded like. That was what
19 I took from your answer there.

20 A. Were you looking for an all-inclusive answer to
21 everything related to the accident?

22 Q. Well, you said you had a second one. What were -- what
23 was another thing that you, you mentioned, as far as the change in
24 operations?

25 A. Well, we've changed the guidance. We have a -- like I

1 told you I would do, our training syllabus has changed on how we
2 -- what we focus on and more of a forced landing type of attitude
3 and talking about getting -- well, I think we're all aware of the
4 cyclic back now and how important that is. So that is now our top
5 priority in -- when an engine failure is recognized, is that the
6 smooth application of how cyclic and collective down
7 simultaneously and how important that is for reversing the airflow
8 in the rotor system and to train to that standard.

9 We also have a GOM revision out waiting to be approved
10 right now where we've increased our minimum altitudes en route.

11 Q. And what are those?

12 A. I'd have to go from memory, Jim, but it's -- I believe
13 it's 1,000 in day; 1500 night, depending on the ceiling.

14 Q. So they can go down to FAA minimums if they need to,
15 but --

16 A. Right.

17 Q. -- typically, you'd fly at the higher altitudes?

18 A. Right. And if you look at the country right now, that
19 would apply to just about everybody.

20 Q. Other changes that you -- that you can think of?

21 A. Just that we're, you know, we're considering simulators
22 and I really -- I believe that because our director of ops is more
23 involved in that directly, that's probably a better question for
24 him.

25 Q. I had asked -- or Michael Koenes had mentioned to me

1 when we were in Grand Prairie about root cause analysis and the
2 safety department was working on that, and he said, yeah, sure,
3 he'd be able to provide that information and what kind of things
4 the safety department or at least you folks have been working on
5 as far as root cause analysis and some of the changes. Is that
6 available to me or is that something they're still working on or
7 something?

8 A. I don't know if they would release that or not because
9 of some of the --

10 MR. McCALL: Do you know?

11 UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER: Well, I think they've got a
12 attorney-client privilege on it, but you made that request of
13 Crystal Hayne (ph.).

14 MR. SILLIMAN: I think it was just through Mike and then
15 through -- I think Dan sent an email. I don't I've ever gone
16 through Crystal on that.

17 UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER: Well, I thought it did, but --

18 MR. SILLIMAN: Maybe not.

19 UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER: -- we'll check with her. We'll
20 check with her.

21 MR. SILLIMAN: Yeah.

22 MR. McCALL: Yeah, because I've had minimal
23 participation in that --

24 BY MR. SILLIMAN:

25 Q. Okay.

1 A. -- because of my involvement with the investigation of
2 the accident.

3 Q. Okay. What -- the changes to the autorotation, maybe
4 you can just kind of explain that a bit further. What was
5 involved there?

6 A. What's involved is making sure that -- well, we've
7 already done this. I think there's conflicting stories floating
8 around that we never roll the throttle back when we're simulating
9 engine failures on the AS-350, and that's not true. If the
10 aircraft is configured and allowed by the flight manual -- we have
11 B2s that are, B3s, we absolutely do that.

12 Q. Um-hum.

13 A. So it's not forbidden, but on a couple of the aircraft
14 that we have, where it's not permitted, then we don't pull that
15 fuel control lever. We don't touch it, as what the flight manual
16 says.

17 We have made a request to Eurocopter to provide some
18 type of modification to where we could do that, we could pull that
19 throttle back. But the emphasis item -- and I still believe the
20 emphasizes item should be the initial reaction from a pilot when the
21 engine fails. It's the initial reaction that is going to make the
22 difference. As you saw, it was 4-1/2 seconds without the
23 cyclic --

24 Q. Yeah.

25 A. -- 25 seconds with it. That buys you a lot of flight

1 time.

2 Q. And how is that -- I guess you've worked with the POI on
3 that, and is that taken care of then or --

4 A. It's submitted. I have it -- it's a draft copy. I've
5 got it on my desk and it's submitted. It's ready to go.

6 Q. Okay.

7 A. But we -- it doesn't mean -- we've started implementing.
8 We've already got our -- talked to the check airmen that train in
9 that aircraft and we've told them what the emphasis item is
10 now --

11 Q. Okay.

12 A. -- that that's important, that you train until that
13 pilot instinctively starts back on the cyclic when the engine
14 quits in cruise flight.

15 Q. And you talked about there being a possibility that the
16 -- the mobile simulators, do you have one available here today or
17 is it --

18 A. We do.

19 Q. Okay. So maybe at the end of the day, I could get a
20 tour of that and so forth?

21 A. Sure.

22 Q. Okay. What would it take for the company to decide,
23 well, this pilot in this situation did something egregious that we
24 really need to, you know, terminate? What kind of situation would
25 -- what kind of circumstances or --

1 A. Well, if there's --

2 Q. -- behavior would say, okay, this is -- that we -- this,
3 we can't allow?

4 A. One would be willful disregard for FARs, Federal
5 Aviation Regulations, and where it impacted the safety of the crew
6 and the aircraft and the pilot and, again, it was willful.

7 Q. So that would be something that you'd have to analyze
8 and try to determine. And when you say just culture, you're --
9 that's part of your analysis is, you know, trying to find that
10 fine line there?

11 A. Yeah. To me, it's an easy line. It's not a fine line.
12 There's -- the majority of issues we have do not result in
13 termination. I mean, the majority.

14 Q. Okay.

15 A. The most recent one that the union and I, we just had a
16 systems board on last Friday, which is the pilot's ability to
17 grieve any type of discipline, and the systems board, comprised of
18 the company and the union, met and upheld a recent termination.
19 It was for a pilot that took night vision goggles into an aircraft
20 that was not configured for night vision goggles and flew flights
21 under them. And that came to us from an FAA whistleblower and we
22 reacted to it. We had to close the base for 24 hours while we
23 figured out what was going on there to see what the issue was.
24 And in that guy's case, it wasn't that he did it once; he'd done
25 it over a 3-month period many times. So it wasn't I did it once

1 and, oh gosh, what an idiot; I should have never -- no ownership.
2 So it was willful. He knew what he was doing was wrong, he tried
3 to conceal it, and the information came out. So, that rose to
4 that level, in my mind, that he couldn't fly for us.

5 Q. Uh-huh. You talked about equipment on an aircraft. So
6 you're training all your pilots to night vision goggle capability?

7 A. Yes. We're at 98 percent right now.

8 Q. And that's also for the crew in back?

9 A. Yes.

10 Q. And you also -- and so, all the helicopters are being
11 conformed or configured with night vision goggles?

12 A. Not all of them. We have some legacy aircraft, and that
13 means like a Bell 22, 20-year-old aircraft that we're replacing.
14 They will not get configured, and there's a handful of those.

15 Q. Okay.

16 A. And that 98 percent includes what we got from Omni.
17 We're almost done with our own operation, having them all. The
18 goal is before 2012 that we can make the statement that we're 100
19 percent goggled --

20 Q. Right.

21 A. -- in the company and we're marching down towards that
22 road. There's a couple of aircraft, like I said, the legacy ones,
23 some old BK-117s, we're not going to modify those.

24 Q. How about -- you talked about the TAWS. What kind of
25 percentage of aircraft have the TAWS on board now?

1 A. I couldn't give you the percentage.

2 Q. Well, kind of a sense. Is that where you're -- the
3 company's tracking for trying to do that as well?

4 A. Well, every new aircraft. So every new aircraft that
5 comes out of here has TAWS on it, every single one. You know, one
6 of the issues that popped up was we had TAWS on most of the
7 aircraft. It was airplane TAWS. We can't use it.

8 Q. Yeah.

9 A. So it was a matter of getting too far ahead of it and
10 trying to be proactive and lined up with equipment we couldn't
11 use. So when they come in for refurb, they all come out with
12 TAWS. When they're brand new, they all come out with TAWS.

13 Q. And they're all probably equipped with ILS as well?

14 A. IFR? No, the single-engine are not. I mean, they have
15 the basic instruments to do it, but they don't have all the
16 sophisticated navigational.

17 Q. Okay.

18 A. Although we do use the Garmin 430, 530s. That's part of
19 our new installation. That's a pretty sophisticated GPS with TAWS
20 in them and has all the approach plates.

21 Q. Anything else about this accident that, you know, you
22 need to, you know, get your head around still, or is there
23 something else that would be helpful for us to know?

24 A. No, not from my end. I'm -- I think I was like
25 everybody else, Jim, when we first got out there and -- this one,

1 some of the pieces went together fast and, I don't know, that's
2 what human factor experts, hopefully, can tell us because I can't
3 answer those questions.

4 MR. SILLIMAN: I don't have anything further.

5 DR. BRENNER: Maryam?

6 MS. ALLAHYAR: No. Actually, my questions were
7 answered.

8 BY DR. BRENNER:

9 Q. Okay, in terms of willful disregard of FAR, the pilot
10 confessed: I made a mistake on fuel. But then when he determined
11 that he would go and take off, I think he reported 45 minutes of
12 fuel --

13 A. I think that's right.

14 Q. -- and which, in fact, it didn't have. And it seems to
15 me he'd be likely to know that that -- I mean, that is an FAR
16 requirement for the recording, but not necessarily what he
17 expected in the thing. How would you evaluate his behavior as a
18 chief pilot?

19 UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER: Can I talk to you just a second
20 about this question?

21 DR. BRENNER: Yeah.

22 UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER: I'd rather do it privately, not
23 in front of him. I think you would rather have me do it privately
24 too.

25 DR. BRENNER: Okay. Sure.

1 MR. McCALL: Well, I -- okay.

2 UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER: Don't -- just -- don't say
3 anything.

4 (Off the record.)

5 (On the record.)

6 (Whereupon, the interview was concluded.)

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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 Dennis McCall

DOCKET NUMBER: CEN11FA599

PLACE: Englewood, CO

DATE: December 8, 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.

Karen M. Galvez
Transcriber