

**NATIONAL TRANSPORTATION SAFETY BOARD**

Office of Aviation Safety  
Washington, D.C. 20594

May 12, 2011

**OPERATIONS GROUP FACTUAL REPORT**

**ADDENDUM 4: INTERVIEWS RELATED TO HRM TRIPS**

**A. ACCIDENT**

Location: Aleknagik, Alaska  
Date: August 9, 2010  
Time: About 1442 Alaska daylight time (ADT)<sup>1</sup>  
Airplane: de Havilland DHC-3T airplane, N455A  
NTSB Number: ANC10MA068

**B. OPERATIONS GROUP MEMBER**

Malcolm Brenner, Ph.D.  
Human Performance Investigator  
National Transportation Safety Board

**C. SUMMARY**

On August 9, 2010, about 1442 Alaska daylight time (ADT), a single engine, turbine-powered, amphibious float-equipped de Havilland DHC-3T airplane, N455A, impacted mountainous terrain about 10 miles northeast of Aleknagik, Alaska. Of the nine people aboard, the airline transport pilot and four passengers died at the scene, and four passengers sustained serious injuries. The airplane sustained substantial damage. The flight was operated by GCI Communication Corp (GCI), Anchorage, Alaska, under the provisions of 14 *Code of Federal Regulations* (CFR) Part 91. The flight originated at a GCI-owned remote fishing lodge on the southwest shoreline of Lake Nerka about 1427 and was en route to a remote sport fishing camp on the banks of the Nushagak River,

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<sup>1</sup> All times are Alaska Daylight Time based on a 24-hour clock, unless otherwise noted. Actual time of accident is approximate.

about 52 miles southeast of the GCI lodge. At the time of the accident, marginal visual meteorological conditions were reported at the Dillingham Airport, about 18 miles south of the accident site; however, the weather conditions at the accident site at that time are not known. No flight plan was filed.

#### **D. DETAILS OF THE INVESTIGATION**

The Operations Group conducted interviews between April 26 to April 30, 2011 concerning weather conditions on the August 8 and 9 trips to the HRM Sports Camp (“HRM”).<sup>2</sup>

Participating in the interviews were Tom Little, Michael Richards, Paul Suffern and Malcolm Brenner from the NTSB. Bill Behnke from GCI participated in the interview of Virgil Peachey with Mr. Peachey’s approval.

Interview summaries follow.

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<sup>2</sup> A detailed review of lodge telephone records indicated that the accident pilot may have telephoned the HRM Sports Camp about twenty minutes before the departure of the accident flight and the current series of interviews was initiated to confirm this call.

## **ANC10MA068**

### **Summary of interviews conducted April 26 to April 29, 2011 concerning weather conditions on August 8 and 9 trips to HRM**

#### **John Delorenzo, HRM Sports Camp – river/fishing guide (20 years experience):**

Mr. Delorenzo said that between 1 – 2 pm on the day of the accident that the pilot, Terry Smith, had called to ask how the weather was at the sports camp. Mr. Delorenzo told Mr. Smith that the weather was “very, very bad,” that the clouds were at tree top level and not to come. He also indicated that it was not very windy. He said it was clear when speaking with Mr. Smith that Mr. Smith was planning to bring GCI guests. Mr. Delorenzo said that the weather on the day of the accident was worse than on Sunday August 8, but that on Sunday it was bad too. He said that around 2pm on Sunday, GCI contacted HRM and said they were not coming, but later the airplane “...just flew in that day. It came in through the fog.” Mr. Delorenzo said he was surprised that the flight got in, as there was fog in the tops of the trees, and that the ceiling was “200 feet max.” After a few hours of fishing, the group departed about 6 pm. Weather at the time of takeoff was a little better than at landing but still quite foggy. Mr. Delorenzo served as guide on one of the fishing boats. The pilot, Terry Smith, did not go fishing with the group but remained behind reading a book that Mr. Delorenzo had loaned him earlier, a hardcover novel by John Grisham. Mr. Delorenzo is not himself a pilot, although he worked at the fish camp around pilots for many years.

#### **Virgil Peachey, GCI contract pilot:**

Mr. Peachey said that on the Sunday August 8 flight to HRM Terry was the pilot in command although Mr. Peachey was a passenger and did sit up in the right front cockpit seat. He said it was “very moist” that day but the weather wasn’t terrible, and that it was “definitely flyable.” He said that en route to the sport camp the weather was decent and that the visibility was between 3 to 5 miles. He said Terry did zig zag some through the Muklung Hills area, but that he wasn’t “looking over Terry’s shoulder,” and he wasn’t concerned. He said that when they arrived at the fish camp that the visibility was between 3 and 5 miles, there was light rain at times, and that he didn’t remember how the winds were, although the flight was “pretty smooth.” He said the landing was made in a left crosswind. He said he recalled that on the way over to the fish camp that Terry used the normal routing, he did use the GPS as well as visual aids outside the airplane, and that the HRM waypoint was activated. Terry had checked weather at Dillingham and King Salmon prior to departure from the GCI lodge and noted that King Salmon was clear and could serve as an alternate if they were unable to reach HRM. He said he did not remember if Terry used TAWS and did not remember which page of the GPS he was using. Mr. Peachey basically reiterated throughout the

interview that the weather was flyable on Sunday and was not really an issue, that it was not dangerous and that it was legal VFR (visual flight rules). When Mr. Peachy was himself the pilot on trips to HRM, he normally set the radar altimeter to 200 feet and believed that most pilots would set it anywhere between 200 to 500 feet. Mr. Peachy indicated that he had never observed Terry fall asleep inadvertently.

**Cindy Mathis, HRM Sports Camp - cook/kitchen helper (6 weeks experience):**

Ms. Mathis said that on Sunday the flight arrived around 1pm, and that the weather was “pretty bad,” wind was about 30 mph, there were swells on the water, and it was raining. She said as far as visibility was concerned, you could see across the river “just above the hills.” She said they when the airplane departed on Sunday that the weather was nasty, that the wind was blowing between 25 to 30 miles per hour, and that you could see across the river, with the clouds “hanging over the mountain tops.”

Ms. Mathis said that on Monday morning, the day of the accident, personnel at HRM did not know if they (the lodge guests) were coming or not, and that at 1146 she received an email from Dave Roseman that they were stilled undecided. Then at 1451 (the time on her cell) Dave Roseman sent an email that GCI guests were coming. Ms. Mathis also said that at this time Terry Smith called to ask Mr. Delorenzo about the weather conditions at HRM. She said John told the pilot that it was very foggy, the wind was blowing hard, that there were white caps on the water, that the wind was about 35 miles per hour, and that the fog was almost down to the water level. She said she knew this was what Mr. Delorenzo said, as she was standing next to him while he was speaking with Terry Smith.

On Sunday, while the guests were out fishing, the pilot Terry Smith sat in the commons area near the kitchen reading a book. Ms. Mathis served him two or three cups of coffee, he ate several cookies, and about 4 or 5 PM he checked aviation sites on the computer.

Ms. Mathis is not herself a pilot. This job provided her first visit to Alaska and, based on the weather she experienced, she was not inclined to return.

**Byron Orth, HRM Sports Camp – river/fishing guide (6 years experience):**

Mr. Orth said that this was one of the wettest summers he had ever experienced while in Alaska. Mr. Orth said that on Sunday the weather was fine, that the hilltop was in sight, and that throughout the day you could hear other airplanes flying around the area, so he didn't think the weather conditions made it “unflyable” that day. He said it was a little bit windy but not that bad, and that he remembered that the view of the river bank was that “you could see it one minute then you couldn't see it.” He said the weather comes in and out very fast. He said it was raining the entire summer. He also said there were “clouds,” but didn't

think it was fog.....just some low clouds, and that you could see about one-quarter of a mile down the river to where it bends. He also said that on Sunday they didn't know just exactly what time the airplane was coming in, and that when it did arrive you could see it before it landed.

Mr. Orth said that on the Monday, the day of the accident, someone had called to say that the GCI airplane was coming. When the GCI flight didn't show up, there was some discussion but HRM personnel just thought GCI personnel were running late and/or had gotten held up. Later that day when GCI called to ask about when the airplane was coming back to the Lodge, John Delorenzo told them that the airplane had never arrived.

Mr. Orth said that after the GCI guests arrived at HRM on Sunday August 8, he didn't recall anyone say was so bad that they shouldn't have come to HRM. Mr. Orth also said they prior to this interview and prior to the NTSB speaking with him, that Cindy Mathis had called him wanting Mr. Delorenzo's phone number. In conclusion, Mr. Orth said that as far as he was concerned, both days were flyable.

Mr. Orth is not himself a pilot.

**Steve Hieb, HRM Sports Camp - Manager (10 years experience):**

Mr. Hieb said on Sunday, the day prior to the accident, that the GCI Otter came in around 3pm, that Virgil Peachey was on the plane, that the weather was cloudy, overcast clouds from about 500 to 600 feet, that it was raining and that it was a little breezy. He said that basically Monday's weather was identical to Sunday's weather. He also said that on Sunday that he could see the airplane coming in from the east, and that he had heard other flights in the area that day. He said that on Monday he wasn't at the fish camp, as he had gone to Dillingham in the morning and didn't return until around 5pm or so, so he was not there when the airplane came to HRM.

Mr. Hieb first met pilot Terry Smith when Mr. Smith began flying into the camp in the days before the accident and would greet Mr. Smith whenever he flew into the camp. On Friday August 6, Mr. Hieb and Mr. Smith sat in the lodge while the guests were fishing and talked for more than one hour. They had many things in common, including experience working in the Middle East. During the conversation, Mr. Hieb mentioned the recent airplane accident at Elmendorf AFB and they discussed it for about 15 minutes. Mr. Smith got choked up, had tears come to his eyes, and shook his head. Mr. Smith's son-in-law died in the accident and he was worried about his daughter and her three children. Mr. Smith believed that something must have broken on the airplane because the pilots were just too good. As a result of this conversation, Mr. Hieb wondered whether Mr. Smith should have been flying at that time or rather should have

taken a short break from flying due to emotional issues related to the death of his son-in-law. Mr. Smith seemed like a great guy.

Mr. Hieb never observed Mr. Smith napping or falling asleep inadvertently while at the camp. Mr. Hieb is not himself a pilot.

**Pam Nickelison, HRM Sports Camp – cook/kitchen helper (about 4 week experience):**

Ms. Nickelison, the other cook who assisted Cindy Mathis at HRM, said that on the afternoon of the accident, when HRM personnel were advising GGI lodge personnel about the weather that she and Cindy, and maybe John Delorenzo (“Little John”) and Byron, went out to assess the weather. She said the weather was good with a good ceiling and visibility, which was between 1 and 2pm. She did not overhear the subsequent conversation between Little John and Terry about the weather after they had gone outside of the tent and made the assessment. She just remembers that the weather at that time was good. However, later about 3 – 3:30pm, the weather changed with lower ceiling and some light rain/mist. But she specifically remembered the weather being good when GCI was calling over and asking about it. She also said the weather was about the same on Sunday, the day before the accident and that she thought it was good enough to fly in. Ms. Nickelison is not herself a pilot.