



RECORD OF CONVERSATION

James F. Struhsaker
Senior Air Safety Investigator
Western Pacific Region

December 30, 2009

Subject: LAX08PA259, N612AZ
Witness: Fred J. Schoeffler
Concern: First flight out of H44, N612AZ

Fred Schoeffler was a passenger on N612AZ's first flight out of H44 on the day of the accident. He submitted a written statement describing his flight to the USFS on August 14, 2008. In his statement, Fred included two photographs of the site taken within minutes of the accident, and stated that "these two photos are good indicators to me of the flight path that we took on the first flight out on August 5, 2008."

During a telephone conversation, I asked Fred to clarify his comparison of the first flight's departure path to the accident flight's departure path. He said he believes the flight paths were nearly identical, with the first flight's departure path slightly to the right (when looking from the departure point downhill along the flight path) of the accident flight's departure path. He said that during the takeoff, his eye level was five to eight feet below the treetops for awhile.

STATEMENT

FRED J. SCHOEFFLER

IRON COMPLEX – BUCKHORN FIRE – DIVISION E

HELISPOT 44 INCIDENT

I was the SOF2 for the Buckhorn Fire, Division E from August 2 to 5, 2008. I was on the first flight out of Helispot 44 (H -44) on August 5th about 1800. There were ten (10) Firefighters and Overhead, including pilot, co-pilot, and Regional Check Pilot. This load was a DIVS, SOF2, two Line Medic/EMT, and six (6) Crew Bosses and Firefighters because we had to shuttle vehicles from Willow Helibase. I sat on the right side, second to the last aisle seat. Why was a Regional Check Pilot onboard these flights?

There were also seven (7) Helitack that were flown up to H-44 on two loads for the extraction mission. Two (2) in a Type III and five (5) in the Type I, S-61 after dropping five (5) Helitack at Big Bar helispot below.

As we lifted off H-44 and began our flight to the south, I felt that our translational lift was almost non-existent. At a minimum, it was very weak. As we proceeded in the translational lift, we got very little actual lift as we flew southeast. The helicopter felt heavy, slow, and sluggish to me. As we flew to the southeast we were approximately five (5) to eight (8) feet below the treetops for quite awhile with very little lift. We eventually cleared the tree tops, however, it was just prior to the large bowl to the east on the right of the aircraft. Line Medic Scott Brumagin, also on the first flight, later commented to me that he thought we were going to hit trees.

Our exit flight was over a seemingly long, circuitous route to the southeast around a large bowl and then downhill toward the Big Bar Helispot below. The flight was approximately 5-7 minutes, estimate. At about the half-way point down, we cleared a saddle no more than fifty (50') above the treetops,

We landed at the Big Bar Helispot and were shuttled to Willow Helibase. It was close to 2000 hours when I heard of a helicopter down on H-44.

There were sixty-six (66) Helitack personnel, excluding overhead on any given day just hanging around the Helibase. The Buckhorn Fire had up to four (4) active helispots with only one having a few Helitack spiked out actually doing their jobs. DIV E personnel had sling loads daily, and Helibase would always inquire: "Do you have Helitack qualified personnel on site to safely accomplish the sling load mission?" Yes, we did, however, why should we have to do our jobs and Helitack's too? IMT's and Managers have enabled Helitack Crews to do this for way too long. It's time to change all this.



This Zion Helitack blog photo indicates the route that the first load flew out exiting to the left and southeast. As we flew, we were five to eight feet below the treetops for awhile.

This second photo below indicates where the S-61 took off from with the first load. We followed that same flight path to the left and southeast. As we departed, we had very little actual translational lift, maintaining a long, circuitous flight off to the left. We flew out and above a large bowl, below the ridgeline. We felt heavy, slow, and sluggish.



These two photos are taken from GOOGLE: Iron Complex Helicopter crash, Zion Helitack blog by Michael Reid. I take issue with his blog, however, these two photos are good indicators to me of the flight path we took on the first flight out on August 5, 2008.

I feel that this fatal incident was both predictable and preventable. For example, had experienced Helitack spend several days on H-44, knowing that the S-61 was to be used for extraction, maybe they would've noticed the weak departure from this site.

I certify that this statement is truthful and accurate to the best of my knowledge based on recollection and notes taken proximate to the incident.

/s/ Fred J. Schoeffler

FRED J. SCHOEFFLER SOF2 , Buckhorn Fire, DIV E
Pine-Strawberry Fire District

Struhsaker Georgia

From: Jim Morrison [REDACTED]
Sent: Tuesday, December 15, 2009 11:57 AM
To: Struhsaker Jim; Struhsaker Georgia
Subject: Fw: Iron Complex - H 44 Incident
Attachments: H 44 Statement.doc

Hi Jim and Georgia, sorry for resending Jim, didn't know if it forwarded from my blackberry ok. As requested, pls see Dave's note below. FYI, Jim

Jim Morrison
Team Member
Safety System Enterprises
USDA Forest Service
Washington Office Detached
[REDACTED]

----- Forwarded by Jim Morrison/WO/USDAFS on 12/15/2009 02:55 PM -----

David A Glose/R4/USDAFS
Sent by: David A Glose/R6/USDAFS

To Jim Morrison/[REDACTED]

cc

Subject Fw: Iron Complex - H 44 Incident

12/15/2009 01:51 PM

Oh. Here it is. I did receive two emails from Fred. I was confused because he used two different e-mails. Here is the attached statement.

----- Forwarded by David A Glose/R6/USDAFS on 12/15/2009 12:49 PM -----

doug fir [REDACTED]

To [REDACTED]

cc [REDACTED]

Subject Iron Complex - H 44 Incident

08/14/2008 01:54 PM

Please respond to
[REDACTED]

Dave,

Here's an electronic copy of my statement. The pages are out-of-sync, but numbered. I'll sign and original signature if you need one.

This is my 35th fire season. I spent four seasons on Helitack as a Squad Boss and Asst Foreman, Payson and Kaibab 1975-1978). I was the Payson IHC Supt. for 26 years (1981 - 2007). I've flown on a few helicopters in my time.

I have flown in a Puma twice as part of a Crew shuttle and never really like those rides. I will never fly on another heavy helicopter ever again - I'll walk.

I will be filing a SAFENET on the Helibase/Helitack issue. This has gone on way too long. The IMT's and Managers enable this type of attitude and behavior. There are probably 80% of those Helitack that would love to stay on Helispots and spike and work.

When Helitack show up on my Divisions I query them accordingly:

- 1) Did you attend the OPERATIONAL briefing?
- 2) Do you have an IAP?
- 3) Do you have ALL the TACTICAL, OPERATIONAL frequencies in your radio?
- 4) Do you have a tool?

I remind them that they are a Firefighter first. I then brief them on LCES and give them the plan - then I allow them to manifest. Oft times, the answer for Escape Routes and Safety Zones is "the helicopter will come back for us." Wrong answer! No lessons learned from South Canyon or Cramer I guess.

Please recommend reinstating the old Helispot Manager position in IQCs and let Helitack spike out like the rest of us for several days at a time and do their jobs.

Fred Schoeffler
Pine-Strawberry Fire District



Arivaca Fire District
P. O. Box 416
Arivaca, AZ 85601

National Transportation and Safety Board
Attn: Jim Struhsaker

18 Jan 10

This is my recollection of August 5th 2008 regarding the Iron 44 incident. At the morning briefing our division supervisor Robert had notified us of the possibility of the team pulling us out that afternoon due to a storm and possibility of a lot of lightening. Robert our division felt that we could shelter in place and he was going to try to prevent us from being pulled out. We spent the whole day battling spot fires along the fire line that was cut from drop point 43 to drop point 44. I worked as a look out just to the west of drop point 44. Robert notified us that all personnel were to pull back to drop point 44 for extraction they were going to be flying us out. Once he had the entire group there he stated that the first group out would be anyone who had a vehicle due to time constraints they were not going to be able to fly us all the way back to the willow helo base. They were going to drop the first group off at a closer helo base along the highway near big bar and they would give us transportation back to the willow helo base and come back to pick up the rest of the crews. During our wait for the helo they made at least one water drop in the pad location to try to limit the amount of brown out. When the type 1 helo came in he circled the landing area and determined that the area they had wet down; which was down hill from the saddle was not where he was going to land. He chose to land a little further up the saddle on a rock area. When he came in to land all the crew had to dive for cover because of the rocks that flew at us (up to 1 inch in diameter). The crew was just brown with dirt and when I opened my pack up later that afternoon, it was full of rocks and dirt. The helitack crew went through a complete briefing with all the passengers and then proceeded to load us on the helo. I ended up in the right front seat across from the gentleman who was doing the ride along to check out the pilot. To my knowledge pretty much all of the over head was on that flight with me which included the other medic, the safety officer, the division and several individuals from the crews for driving the crew buggies back. The only overhead left at that time I believe was Mr. Scott Posner who I believe is a strike team leader. As the helo lifted off it seemed very slow, it took a little bit to get up above the tree line and it started moving forward to the south out over the trees and after a short period of time the helo literally dived down into the valley as we picked up speed. I was looking out the window and could see the pine needles on the tree tops which to be able to see that kind of detail meant we were very close which made me nervous, since I had never been that close before on any flights. We flew out to the south to the helo base, cutting in between peaks on a path that I felt was way to close to the ground and the trees until we finally landed at the helo spot, after unloading the passengers the helo lifted off and went back to pick up another load. At that time I spoke with the safety officer Mr. Fred Sheffler and we both agreed that the helo had been way to close to the trees and it made him uncomfortable as well. He was

not sure why they had flown that close. They loaded us up in a truck and drove us back to the willow helo base to pick up our vehicles. We then drove back out to where the helo was dropping off personnel, when we arrived we were notified that the helo had crashed. I called the med leader on the radio and asked if they wanted us to go back to the willow helo base, or wait there to fly out to the location. He stated that they were setting up a trauma area at the main helo base at the ICP and he needed us there. I drove back there to the ICP and I helped the paramedic set up the trauma area. Ultimately the 4 survivors were flown directly from the crash scene to the hospital and we were not needed.

Sincerely,

Scott Brumagin
Battalion Chief, AFD
[REDACTED] home
[REDACTED] cellular