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RESCUE HELICOPTER CRASH

Pilot's Request for Help On Rare Approach Probed

By Aaron C. Davis, Del Quentin Wilber and Jenna Johnson

Washington Post Staff Writers  
Wednesday, October 1, 2008; Page B02

Investigators probing the deadly weekend crash of a Maryland State Police medical rescue helicopter are studying a final request the pilot made to an air-traffic controller at Andrews Air Force Base moments before the aircraft disappeared from radar.

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RESCUE HELICOPTER CRASH: Pilot's Request for Help On Rare Approach Probed

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Pilot Stephen J. Bunker, who was among four killed in the crash, asked the controller for help with a rarely used type of instrument approach that would have required the controller to help guide the helicopter close to the ground.

According to a source familiar with the investigation, the controller on duty was not certified to perform the procedure, known as a surveillance radar approach. The source and others quoted in this report spoke on condition of anonymity because of the ongoing investigation.

Experts yesterday said that they doubted whether the last-minute help could have altered the fate of the flight: The helicopter disappeared before Bunker and the controller likely would have gotten very far. National Transportation Safety Board spokesman Keith Holloway said the pilot's request is being investigated. The NTSB has obtained tapes of Bunker's last radio transmissions. Investigators are mostly focused on mechanical or navigational system failure or pilot error.

State police spokesman Greg Shipley declined to comment on Bunker's landing request,

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citing the ongoing investigation. He said state police put one of its helicopters back into the air last night and will bring the others back after further equipment checks are completed.

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Government sources said that before Saturday, Bunker had last flown in weather that required him to rely solely on instruments in May, four months earlier. That's a relatively long period without practicing flying using instrumentation, experts said, but sources close to the investigation said that Bunker was such an experienced pilot that it might not have mattered.

Bunker's final request for help, however, thrusts air-traffic control capabilities at one of the Washington region's most sensitive airports into the spotlight. Typically, only one air-

traffic controller is stationed at Andrews during an eight-hour period each night, according to the [Federal Aviation Administration](#), which manages air traffic control for the military base.

FAA spokesman Arlene Salac declined to say whether that controller is required to be proficient in surveillance radar approach, which requires a controller to use airport-based radar to direct an aircraft to a point where the pilot can hopefully see landing lights. Pilots and an air traffic controller also said it could be difficult for a lone controller to conduct the procedure if other aircraft were attempting to land at the same time.

Salac, citing the investigation, would not discuss how many controllers were in the tower when Bunker requested the special procedure or the agency's protocol for granting such requests during the lightly staffed night shift.

Published military and civilian notices that tell pilots about airports' conditions and services do not list any restrictions on the surveillance landing procedure at Andrews. The [Defense Department](#)'s notices list restrictions at other military bases when staff members are not available to perform the procedure, according to military pilots who reviewed the notices for [The Washington Post](#), speaking on condition of anonymity because they are not authorized to discuss the restrictions.

The state police department has hired an independent contractor to test the Instrument Landing System on the 11 remaining American Eurocopter Dauphins. That system allows pilots to guide themselves into runways using a radio signal. Although Bunker was mostly lined up with the runway, he reported problems capturing that signal before he requested the other surveillance procedure.

Investigators have determined the helicopter crashed 11:58 p.m. Saturday.

As the lengthy investigation into the crash was just beginning, [Charles County](#) sheriff's department said it had closed its investigation of the car accident involving two women that prompted the doomed rescue flight.

Sheriff's spokeswoman [Kristen Timko](#) said investigators concluded that the accident was probably caused when [Jordan Wells](#), 18, "failed to provide full attention" to a wet, slippery road late Saturday night.

Wells remained in critical but stable condition yesterday. The passenger in the car, [Ashley J. Younger](#), 17, died in the helicopter crash.

Timko said detectives found "no indication that speed or alcohol were factors." The two girls, who graduated from Waldorf's [Westlake High School](#) in June, told their parents

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they were going to a carnival. Wells was driving on Smallwood Drive and had almost reached Younger's neighborhood when police say her [Ford Taurus](#) skidded on the wet road, crossed a grassy median, hit several small trees and then collided with a car.

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