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I-Team

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I-Team: Emergency in the Sky

John Mercure

Emergency medical flights are designed to save lives.

But experts say the reality is that, outside of combat, medical flights are the deadliest flights there are.

Senior Investigative Reporter John Mercure and the I TEAM spent the last 6 months investigating medical aviation. It's an important investigation titled, 'Emergency in the Sky'.

We've all seen medical helicopters buzzing overhead.

They land at accident scenes.

They transport critically ill patients between hospitals.

The dangerous secret is that all too often these choppers crash.

Emergency medical flights save lives. We've discovered that they also cost lives.

We've uncovered sloppy government oversight, poor pilot training, and almost non-existent safety equipment.

One safety expert told us that flying in many medical choppers is like flying in a time bomb.

Justine Green is a decorated military helicopter pilot. Green is also certified to fly jets. He is also a lawyer and one of the country's leading experts on emergency medical aviation.

"It's as dangerous as you can get unless you're over in Iraq flying in military aviation," Green told us on a recent visit to New York City.

Ricky Lapensee had it all. He had a family he adored, including two sons and a wife.

Lapensee had a job as a firefighter in Ypsilanti, Michigan. And in his spare time he worked on the organ transplant team at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor.

On June 4, 2007 Lapensee got a phone call that he needed to head to Milwaukee with a team of doctors and nurses to pick up a set of lungs. The recipient was waiting in an Ann Arbor hospital.

lapensee's mom will never forget that morning. What happened had never happened before. "He said, 'I don't want to go.' " Lulu Lapensee told us through her tears recently. "He said, 'I'm afraid.' and I don't know why he said that," she sobbed.

Lapensee and the Michigan transplant team recovered the organs from Milwaukee.

As they were heading back to Michigan something went terribly wrong. The Cessna jet carrying Ricky Lapensee and five other health care professionals slammed into Lake Michigan at 250 miles per hour.

"I walked out into the kitchen and he had just turned the TV on and they were talking about this plane that went down in Milwaukee and I said to him, 'That was Ricky's plane,' " Lulu Lapensee painfully told us as we sat in her living room recently. "We both died that day ourselves," Lulu added as she sat next to her husband Sonny Lapensee.

Green believes under current rules and regulations emergency medical aviation is inherently dangerous. "EMS flight for the flight crew is a very dangerous job," he told us.

"When you have a pilot who is under the pressure of an emergency mission trying to bring organs on an emergency basis you have that human nature and that noble sense of mission to complete that mission and mistakes can be made."

The National Transportation Safety Board continues to investigate the Lapensee crash.

His parents told us that Ricky Lapensee also flew many organ transplant missions in medical helicopters. Studies show that EMS chopper flights are the most dangerous flying, short of combat.

The list where medical crashes have taken place is exhaustive; Cleveland, Kansas, Washington, D.C., Seattle, Amarillo, Texas, Green Bay. Between 2000 and 2005 10% of all air ambulances crashed. Experts say if commercial passenger jets crashed as often, 90 airliners would crash each year.

Christine Negroni is an air safety investigator. "I think it (EMS) is extremely, unnecessarily dangerous," Negroni told us. "It's an overwhelming problem. It's a little known problem. And it's very concerning to me that the attention has not been paid to this because the people who die, die doing something heroic. There's no question they do."

So why are there so many crashes? Leading safety experts say there are several reasons. There is very little federal regulation. Pilots don't have to follow FAA rules for pilot rest that are required for commercial pilots in almost every other sector of aviation. safety equipment isn't mandated. In most states there is no standardization for when a medical helicopter is called or who makes the call. And no one tells them when it's just too dangerous to fly.

Negroni believes those factors lead to unnecessary danger. "You can't put people's lives at risk to send a helicopter a place where they're not going to be able to get in safely, and more importantly, get out safely," she says. "It is an inappropriate cost. You don't kill people to save people. It's that simple."

Every medical aviation operation claims that safety is #1. When Milwaukee Flight For Life makes that claim, the facts back it up. Since its inception in 1983 flight for life has transported 25,000 patients. They have not had one accident.

Claire Rayford is has worked for Milwaukee Flight for Life for 24 years. "We are passionate about patient care, but safety is our absolute #1 priority. If you are committed to safety you are always looking to say, 'What is the next level?' What are the other components that I need to do? What is the additional training? What is the additional technology?" "

Charlie McCall has been a Milwaukee Flight for Life pilot for 23 years. "It's just like driving a car or a truck. follow the rules and everything will turn out just fine."

The problem is that there are very few rules.

The Lapensees continue to miss their son. They don't believe that will ever end. They visit his Michigan grave often. "I think it's terrible. I think they ought to find a different way or something." Lulu told us.

And Congress may be getting closer to finding that different way. Just two weeks ago a bill was introduced in the U-S House that would address some of the major safety concerns surrounding medical flights. A similar bill is expected to be introduced in the u-s senate.

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