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Numerous causes for helicopter crash

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JUNEAU, Alaska (AP) - A federal report released Thursday said an inexperienced pilot, plus lax federal agency and company oversight contributed to a fatal helicopter crash 13 months ago.

The National Transportation Safety Board released its findings for crash of an emergency medical service helicopter that killed four people near Whittier on Dec. 3, 2007.

It was part of a sweeping report covering incidents between December 2007 through October 2008. There were nine emergency medical helicopter crashes resulting in 35 deaths.

Alaska's crash killed patient Gaye McDowell, 60, of Cordova; pilot Lance Brabham, 42, of Soldotna; nurse John Stumpff, 47, of Sterling; and paramedic Cameron Carter, 24, of Kenai.

The medical helicopter was transporting McDowell from Cordova to Anchorage in a flight that took off around dusk.

The aircraft, however, went missing later that night about 3 miles east of Whittier, in Prince William Sound.

Only Stumpff's body and pieces of the aircraft were recovered over the next several days.

"While crossing over a portion of ocean approaching rising terrain, the helicopter likely encountered low ceilings and snow squalls," the report said. "With the pilot unable to discern either the shore or the ocean, it is probable he flew the helicopter under control into the ocean."

On Thursday, investigators cited several factors for the crash, including:

- It was the pilot's first winter flying season in Alaska. Brabham also chose to fly using visual references rather than panel instruments that could guide him in deteriorating weather or at

night.

According to the report: "He had expressed his concern to a mechanic prior to the flight about flying over the accident route and water at night, and also told the nurse to bring his night vision goggles (NVGs) to assist him in seeing terrain. The pilot also had NVGs."

- The helicopter's owner and operator, Evergreen Equity Inc. of McMinnville, Ore., didn't adhere to a federally mandated safety program, according to the report. The company could not produce a flight "risk assessment form" required for this flight as well as for previous emergency medical services (EMS) flights, the report said. Also, Evergreen did not provide continuing oversight of the flight, otherwise, "it is probable the helicopter would have been turned around/canceled," the report said. Evergreen spokeswoman Laura Graham said the company is "not commenting at this time on the report."

- Insufficient federal oversight of the company. The Federal Aviation Administration had not assigned an inspector to oversee Evergreen's operations until two months before the accident. Further, this person "had not inspected or visited the remote EMS location," the report said.

FAA Spokeswoman Alison Duquette said the agency will respond to the report within the next 90 days as required.

"We will carefully review it," she said. "We will look and respond to the NTSB as quickly as possible."

Family members contacted by The Associated Press had not heard about the report and said they were anxious to read it.

Crystal Roman-Stumpff said she hopes the death of her father, John, will lead to better practices in the future.

"I've noticed a lot more often that EMS helicopters seem to be falling out of the sky," she said. "I kinda wonder what the FAA should be doing to fix this."

Roman-Stumpff said her biggest regret is that her 2-year-old daughter, Selena, will grow up without a maternal grandfather.

"Every time I think that she won't know her grandfather, that's the hardest thing for me to handle," Roman-Stumpff said. "I really miss him a lot, too."

"He was an adrenaline junkie. He loved being up there. When I think of that, there is not a lot of regret."

Gaye McDowell's husband, Gary, had no comment on the report, and attempts to reach family members of the other victims were not immediately successful.