

9 Apr 1997

Helicopter crashes at PBLA

The pilot and four passengers are injured moments after takeoff.

By Christine Stapleton and Monika Gonzalez, Palm Beach Post Staff Writers

WEST PALM BEACH — Investigators are trying to determine why a helicopter owned by the South Florida Water Management District crashed moments after leaving Palm Beach International Airport Tuesday morning, injuring three district workers and two property appraisers on board.

As the helicopter lifted off from near International Aviation Inc.'s hangar, a worker on the ground saw a roll of plastic stream from the direction of the helicopter and land on the pavement, said Timothy Monville, an air safety investigator with the National Transportation Safety Board.

Large torn pieces of plastic sheeting were found partially sucked into the helicopter's air intake screen and wrapped in its rotor. Monville said the sheeting in the intake is what could have brought the helicopter down.

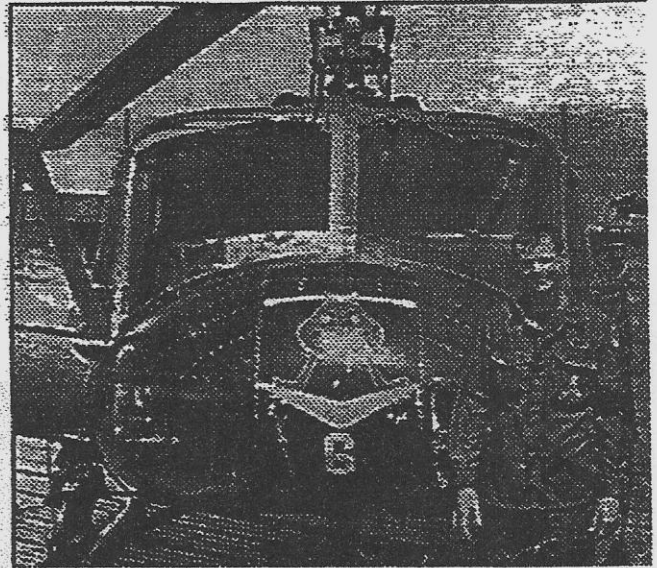
The clear plastic with "48-inch 1.2m Wet Paint handmasker" printed in red ink is the same plastic sheeting used at International Aviation's hangar when painting aircraft, Monville said.

On Monday, International Aviation replaced the helicopter's windshield, Monville said. That maintenance may have involved painting the aircraft, he said. About 20 feet of plastic sheeting remained in the roll that was seen falling, he said. The plastic has been turned over to the Palm Beach County Sheriff's Office to be analyzed for fingerprints, Monville said.

Officials at International Aviation refused to comment.

Thomas James Renison, 51, a pilot for the district since July 1990, lifted off from International Aviation about 8:45 am in the Aerospatiale helicopter. The French-made six-seater was one of three helicopters owned by the agency, which also has its own plane. Renison, a retired Army colonel with more than 11,000 hours of accident-free flight time, had one prior crash, when he was shot down in Vietnam, district officials said.

Renison was flying with four passengers: Doris Anderson, a senior real estate specialist for the district; Michael R. Barrett, chief appraiser for the district; Cathy Evans, a Jupiter appraiser; and Robert Grover, a Tequesta appraiser.



Hero pilot Thomas J. Renison of West Palm Beach got his experience flying Hueys like this one in Vietnam.

The five were flying to inspect a 2,700-acre tract in south Martin County that the district wants to buy. The site is part of the Atlantic Ridge Ecosystem, 12,700 acres of pasture, scrub and wetlands that is one of the state's top priorities for land preservation.

The district had hired Grover and Evans to perform separate appraisals of the site, land management director Bill Malone said. Barrett was supposed to review their work, while Anderson is the lead negotiator for the purchase.

Visiting the site in person is essential to doing a proper appraisal, and the most efficient way to view such a large, undeveloped parcel is from the air, Malone said.

"You just can't do a credible job of estimating the value of a piece of property without seeing the property," Malone said.

Tom Sawyer, also a Vietnam veteran combat pilot, was about to land his Hughes 500 helicopter at PBLA when he saw the district's helicopter heading to the northeast just after taking off.

"I just radioed him and said I was on his right and he said he saw me," said Sawyer, the pilot for traffic reporter Paul Cavanaugh.

Sawyer said he was preparing to land, flying at about 300-350 feet, coming west from Interstate 95. The district's helicopter was flying at about 200-250 feet, Sawyer said.