



Emails warned of training problems before 2006 military chopper crash: report

3 hours ago

HALIFAX, N.S. — A military report into the crash of a military helicopter off Nova Scotia in July 2006 that killed three men says officers sent numerous emails warning of poor pilot training in the months before the accident.

One of the notes about the decline in the ability of pilots was titled "Prepare for incoming wake-up call!"

It was sent May 5, 2006, by an air force captain who "voiced his dissatisfaction" with the results of check rides for Cormorant pilots, says the report by a military board of inquiry. Check rides are training flights where officers assess the flying abilities of pilots.

Nine weeks later, on July 13, 2006, a Cormorant search and rescue aircraft plunged into the ocean off Canso, N.S., during a night-time hoisting exercise over a fishing vessel.

Sgt. Duane Brazil, 39, Master Cpl. Trevor McDavid, 31, and Cpl. Kirk Noel, 31, died after they were unable to escape from the submerged aircraft.

The board of inquiry report, obtained by The Canadian Press, echoes many of the findings of a March 2008 report by the military's directorate of flight safety, which concluded a lack of training led to flying errors by the cockpit crew.

Many portions of the board of inquiry report have been removed, with a covering letter from the Air Force telling families it was sent to that the sections have been "severed in accordance with the Privacy Act."

Like the directorate's report, the board of inquiry investigators found the pilot overrode the chopper's automatic controls, "which led to the unusual attitude that caused the aircraft to crash."

However, the military board of inquiry also points to technical problems with the Cormorant fleet as an underlying cause of the crash because they led to a reduction in flying time and training for search and rescue crews.

"Contributing either directly or indirectly to the accident were deficiencies associated with the cockpit crew's training, qualifications and proficiency," says the board's report.

In its 185-page analysis, the investigators document a series of warnings that the flying staff at the airbase in Greenwood, N.S., were poorly trained due to restricted flying hours.

It said restrictions on training flights, which were limited to just two hours, related to recurring cracks in the Cormorant's tail rotor hubs that surfaced seven years ago.

Just weeks before the crash, training flights were extended to three hours but that left the crews little time to improve their skills before taking on the tricky night hoist exercise - considered among the most difficult of manoeuvres for search and rescue pilots.

The report says on May 15, 2006, the commander of 413 search and rescue squadron at Greenwood, N.S., asked one of his staff to look into whether the lack of crew training in the air could be made up for with "ground training to compensate for the lack of flying."

A week later, a captain responded in an email that "skills were eroding and that it could not be compensated for by increased ground training."

The report reveals pilots had already started reporting "red" stress points in June 2005, warning that skills had "deteriorated to an unacceptable level" because of the training restrictions.

The report says another officer "raised the proficiency issue on numerous occasions with the chain of command to the point where he was told to 'stand down' as the problem was well understood."

The investigators found that 1 Canadian Air Division headquarters in Winnipeg didn't find a

solution to address the training problem.

The board of inquiry report also lays a portion of the blame on the base in Greenwood for failing to come up with solutions other than demanding relaxed restrictions on training time.

A spokesman for the Air Force could not be reached for comment.

After the flight safety report was released last March, Brig.-Gen Yvan Blondin, a senior commander at 1 Canadian Air Division, said staff were well aware of the faltering proficiency.

But he said flight restrictions had been increased from three to five hours and that proficiency levels were at "satisfactory levels."