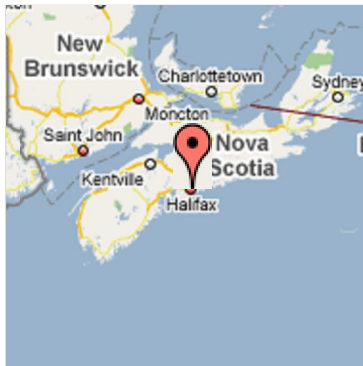


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## Family wants stiffer action by military after fatal chopper crash of N.S.

14 hours ago

HALIFAX, N.S. — The uncle of an airman who died when a military helicopter plunged into the Atlantic Ocean in 2006 says the penalties are too light for a pilot who was unqualified for the mission and officers who approved the flight.

In one of the worst search and rescue crashes in recent years, the Cormorant helicopter crashed on July 13, 2006, off the coast of Canso, N.S., killing three aircrew in the rear of the chopper.

Two military reports into the accident say the cockpit crew lacked the training and proficiency for the difficult night-time hoisting manoeuvre.

But two family members say they are disappointed by the investigations done into the accident, which show the military was warned it couldn't maintain training levels for chopper pilots because of mechanical problems with the Cormorants.

"They knew someone should have done something way before it got to that point of the crash," said Shawn Noel, whose nephew, Master Cpl. Kirk Noel, died in the crash.

"There has to be consequences for somebody, so that it never happens again. As far as I'm concerned, it's going to happen again."

Reports from the military's directorate of flight safety and a board of inquiry came to similar conclusions about the cause of the accident.

The board of inquiry investigators found in a report last week that the pilot overrode the chopper's automatic controls, "which led to the unusual attitude that caused the aircraft to crash."

Last year, the directorate of flight safety said the acting air captain hadn't maintained current qualifications for such a mission.

The pilot, who had just come off a lengthy leave period, had flown 10.5 hours in the previous three months, rather than the 30 hours needed to qualify for more complex missions, such as the night-hoist exercise.

According to the report by the flight directorate, the pilot should have done further "proficiency checks" before the hoisting exercise.

Both reports also say there were repeated warnings from Cormorant pilots and officers at the base in Greenwood, N.S., that problems with the aircraft's rear tail rotors meant training hours were restricted.

Noel said his mother brought up Kirk in St. Anthony, N.L., and he regarded his nephew as a brother in the close-knit, extended family.

He said he's angry that large sections of the recent board of inquiry report are "blacked out," including sections on pilot training.

The findings and recommendations of the inquiry are used by senior Air Force commanders to determine if penalties are handed out to any officers.

During a meeting with the senior investigator, Noel said he was told there were no formal disciplinary measures for the acting aircraft captain, the co-pilot, and the pilot who was assessing the training flight. There were also no formal disciplinary measures for officers who allowed the mission to proceed.

"I asked about that and they (the board of inquiry investigator) said administrative action will be taken, and we'll never find out what it was," Noel said in an interview from St. John's, N.L.

"I'm not satisfied."

Administration actions, which may include letters on career files and can prevent promotions, are less severe than formal disciplinary actions, which can include demotions and fines.

Maj. Jim Hutcheson, the Air Force's public affairs officer for the board of inquiry, said disciplinary punishment isn't imposed when there's no intention to commit a wrongful act.

"The chain of command look at the evidence that was brought to light by the board of inquiry and they determined there was no reason to believe there was an intent, or that an intent was behind the actions or inactions of the personnel involved," he said in an interview on Tuesday.

Hutcheson said administrative actions can be quite "serious and significant," and can include measures that prevent pilots from returning to flying duties.

He said he realizes families "want to know as much information as possible," but for privacy reasons full details can't be released on the consequences of the inquiries.

Hutcheson passed on a request for interviews with the officers who were investigated. They were unavailable for comment.

Robert McDavid, the father of Master Cpl. Trevor McDavid, a 31-year-old flight engineer in training who died in the crash, said he feels the families have a right to know more.

"I should have a right because not only did I lose a son, but so did a number of other families," he said from Capreol, Ont.

However, Gerald Brazil, the father of Sgt. Duane Brazil, the 39-year-old flight engineer who died in the crash, said he's ready to move on.

He said he's satisfied that the military has learned from the tragedy, and added he isn't seeking further penalties for the air crew or officers at the base.

"The investigation, as far as I'm concerned, they put a lot of effort into it," he said from his home near St. John's. "Hopefully it will be helpful to somebody else."

Still, Noel said his family remains concerned about technical issues with the Cormorant helicopters.

Up until just a few weeks before the crash, the helicopters were restricted to two hours of training flight time because of minute cracks in the rear tail rotors.

Hutcheson said there have been changes to the flying restrictions, allowing training missions to go from four to five hours.

A total of six or seven Cormorants are currently available for use out of a fleet of 14 aircraft, he said, giving each airbase a minimum of two helicopters.

He added the bases are still having difficulties obtaining some spare parts, which can cut into the availability of the aircraft.

In an email, Hutcheson also indicated that since the safety reports were published, pilots are training more frequently, there is more time being spent in simulators, a new training manual is in use, and stricter checks are done on pilot qualifications. A total of 60 changes have been made in response to the flight safety report.