

November 17, 2008

Missing helicopter found

Cause of crash still under investigation

BY KATRINA CORNWELL/Staff

Five days after emergency agencies recovered the body of a missing Mt. Juliet pilot, the wreckage of the Nov. 2 helicopter crash was located, according to Sumner County Emergency Management Agency Director Ken Weidner.

Robert Koudelka, 44, died when the 2001 Robinson Helicopter he was flying crashed into the Cumberland River between Sumner and Wilson counties.

The cause of the crash has not yet been determined and remains under investigation with The National Transportation Safety Board.

Koudelka's remains were transported to the state medical examiner's office, which is expected to use either dental records or DNA to make a positive identification. Local officials who found Koudelka's identification informed the family of the probability he was the accident victim.

Weidner was aboard the search boat when the helicopter was located with the use of an underwater camera around 5 p.m. Sunday. Search operations have been extensive with more than 35 agencies assisting.

Finding the helicopter

Early last week, Weidner contacted Capt. Dale Appel, of the Burlington, Ky., Boone County Water Rescue agency requesting assistance.

Boone County units arrived in Gallatin Friday and were briefed on nearly two weeks of search operations. The rescue group, along with emergency workers from Sumner County Emergency Management, from Sea Tow and Drakes Creek Marina, went to work that night, Weidner said.

The search continued through the night until 4 a.m. Saturday and resumed again four hours later until the discovery of the wreckage around 5 p.m. Sunday.

The Boone County unit, using a Marine sonic side-scan sonar unit in 54 feet of water, eventually discovered the aircraft.

With an underwater camera, EMA units were able to actually view the wreckage.

The initial search area was the Cumberland River, he said. After investigation and interviewing residents door-to-door on the Sumner and Wilson riverbanks, officials focused on the 4-mile area west of the bridge.

Throughout the nearly two-week search and recovery operation, Area EMA officials used side-scan sonar with sizeable computer monitors to search for the helicopter while being assisted by emergency units of Sumner, Wilson, Rutherford, Davidson and Williamson counties, state and federal agencies.

The sonar helps map the surface of the 40-50 feet deep water and better navigate divers, who boarded rescue boats at about 9 a.m. Nov. 5.

"It's the best technology we've got to do this type of operation. We're not going to necessarily see a helicopter," Weidner said. "We're looking for anomalies in the water, odd shapes. You have to be able to interpret what you're seeing."

Search was county's largest water recovery

At least 35 federal, state and local emergency response agencies from Sumner, Wilson, Rutherford,

Davidson and Williamson counties assisted in the eight-day recovery operation.

Up to 50 people were at the scene each day since Nov. 3, Weidner said.

“The manhours are going to be in the thousands,” he said. “Some groups had 15 people there 10 hours a day.”

Everybody did all they were able to do,” Weidner said. “We utilized every tool we had. In an operation like this, it starts out with a single phone call. It goes into what it needs to be. It was good to see everybody working together.”

Additional Facts

Assisting agencies

- Sumner County Emergency Management Agency
- Wilson EMA
- Sumner County Sheriff's Office
- Sumner County EMS
- Gallatin Police Department
- Wilson County Sheriff's Office
- Lebanon Public Safety
- Tennessee Highway Patrol (Aviation)
- Hendersonville Fire Department (Special Ops Dive Team)
- Tennessee Homeland Security
- Nashville Police Department
- United States Coast Guard (Group Ohio Valley Louisville)
- Tennessee Emergency Management Agency
- Federal Aviation Administration
- National Transportation Safety Board
- Sumner County Regional Airport
- Lebanon Airport
- BNA Flight Tower
- Air Force Recovery Rescue
- Civil Air Patrol
- Trousdale County EMS/EMA
- Rutherford County EMA
- Overton County EMA
- Portland Fire Department
- Goodlettsville Fire Department
- C & O Marine

- Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency (sonar)
 - Franklin County Rescue (sonar)
 - Nashville Office of Emergency Management (sonar)
 - U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (sonar)
 - Rutherford County EMS (Special Ops) (sonar)
 - Coffee County EMA (sonar)
 - Clay County Rescue (sonar)
 - Knox County Rescue (sonar)
 - Boone County (Ky.) Water Rescue (underwater camera)
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