

# Search ends, investigation begins

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The search for the Robinson 44 helicopter, flown by Robert E. Koudelka of Wilson County, ended at 5 p.m. Sunday, November 16, in the channel of the Cumberland River near the Highway 109 bridge.

Large pieces of the helicopter, including the tail rotor blade, were located at a depth of 54 feet, with a side-scan sonar camera provided by Boone County (Kentucky) Water Assistance. Emergency Management Agency Director Ken Weidner stated in a press release that he had contacted Captain Dale Appel of Boone County Water Assistance earlier in the week.

Crews from Sea Tow Salvage, for Atlanta Air Recovery, and Drakes Creek Marina had been working Friday night until 4 a.m. Saturday, according to Weidner; they resumed the search at 8 a.m. Saturday and continued until 8 p.m., starting again on Sunday morning at 8 a.m. Sumner County Emergency Medical Services personnel were on standby at the command center on the Sumner County side of the river.

Salvage divers from Sea Tow descended after the wreck was visible by the underwater camera. The recovery process took several hours to complete.

"Divers went down and tied airbags and floated the main body," said Air Safety Investigator Butch Wilson of the National Transportation Board. "The tail rotor came up separately and was laid on the barge. It took about four hours to get it out of the water," added Wilson.

Wilson estimated that 95 per cent of the aircraft has been salvaged. "We're missing skids and part of one rotor blade."

The recovery that lasted two weeks, described by Wilson as "one of the more difficult" to conduct, was completed Tuesday morning, November 18, with removal of the various pieces of the aircraft to the EMA building, where they were re-assembled for the initial examination. The pieces were later transported to Griffin, Georgia.

Wilson said, "The recovery time was pretty standard; locating it was what took time."

The Federal Aviation Administration and the National Transportation Safety Board, the independent government agency responsible for determining the cause of the aircraft crash, will continue the investigation.

A body retrieved Tuesday, November 11, near Cages Cove in the Cumberland River close to the TVA power lines, has been tentatively identified as the Wilson County pilot, pending further information from the state Medical Examiner's office.

The small helicopter, a type often used for training and instruction, disappeared from radar during a routine certification flight from Lebanon to Cornelia Fort Airport in Nashville.

"He (Koudelka) was flying at night for part of his training," said Wilson. "Yes, they (the Robinson 44s) have an accident history—because of the helicopter, sometimes the pilot. It is a good training helicopter." He described it as "pretty safe."

Wilson continued, "The pilot is supposed to do a pre-flight inspection. . . . When used for training, the helicopter has 100-hour inspections, an annual one (when not used for training)."

"We had so many unknowns," said Weidner. "There were leads—people heard a crash but couldn't state the location. . . . We had people that maybe saw the helicopter flying, people who lived on the east of 109. . . . One witness saw a helicopter go down below the tree line."

Weidner described the search: "It's like a 200-piece puzzle with one or two pieces and no corner pieces."

Weidner described the narrowing of the search based on information about "forward speed and descent speed of the aircraft. However, the general area of the search was still large. "We just kept eliminating areas, working downstream."



Wilson added, "The radar data was sketchy because he had dropped below radar. . . I was very impressed when Ken found him (the pilot)."

Wilson added, "With the known air speed and factored in with the speed of the descent and the point last seen on radar, we had an area."

Weidner stated that it was the discovery of a piece of the helicopter's antenna that "sparked the search. "We still didn't know we had a helicopter in the water until Wednesday, when we found the antenna floating. That's what sparked the search. We just knew we were missing a helicopter (before that). . . .That is the one piece of actual evidence we had."

The aircraft, which weighs 2,500 pounds when fully loaded, does not contain the technology present on large aircraft, commonly known as "the black box," that might help in determining the cause of the crash, according to Wilson. "Not on a small helicopter like that," he said.

"The damage is pretty significant," he stated, "We're looking at everything, but nothing has jumped out at us yet. But that's nothing unusual at this stage of the inquest," he added.

In an interview during the first week of the search, Wilson commented, "The helicopter is unforgiving. If there is a mechanical problem or pilot error, it's serious."

Wilson praised the EMA and Weidner: "Without them we would never have found the helicopter. He did such a magnificent job of providing leadership and guidance."

He stated when Weidner made the call to inform him of the helicopter's location, "I said, 'You're in charge. I want you to do it (the recovery).'"

Wilson added, "We would never have found it without his support, his contacts. All the people involved did a wonderful job."

More than 35 agencies from Tennessee and Kentucky cooperated in the search for the missing pilot and the downed helicopter. Wilson estimated that the investigation into the cause of the disaster would take approximately six months to conclude.

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