

Shetland helicopter crash exposes North Sea safety crisis

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Four oil rig workers were killed in a helicopter that ditched into the sea near Sumburgh airport in the Shetland Islands off the North coast of Scotland last Friday.

The workers, three men and a woman, from England and Scotland, were among the 18 passengers and crew of an AS332 L2 Super Puma aircraft, which appears to have suffered a sudden loss of power on approach to Sumburgh airport. The flight, operated by Canadian helicopter company CHC, was carrying crew from the Borgstein Dolphin oil drilling rig to shore.

The helicopter ditched in the sea without warning then rolled over. Flotation bags prevented parts of the craft, which broke up, from sinking, but the passenger compartment filled with water. Television pictures of the scene showed only the helicopter's landing gear and flotation bags above the surface. At the time of writing, the aircraft's flight recorder had been located, but not yet recovered, and the tragic accident remains unexplained.

The crash has triggered a wave of alarm and protest from oil workers in the North Sea, all of whom rely on long oversea helicopter flights to reach production platforms and drilling rigs.

Decades of North Sea oil production have produced a series of fatal air accidents, and numerous ditchings and near-misses. In 1986, 45 people died near Sumburgh when a Boeing Chinook's twin rotors lost synchronization and collided with each other. Six men died in 1990 when a Sikorsky helicopter struck an oil storage platform. Two years later, 11 workers were killed during a 200 metre flight in adverse weather conditions from the Cormorant Alpha rig to a nearby accommodation barge.

Workers' concerns have focused on the aging Eurocopter AS332 Super Puma, variants of which

account for 50 percent of the North Sea industry fleet, and which has in recent years suffered a series of catastrophic failures. The aircraft first flew in 1978 and was introduced to the North Sea in the 1980s.

Anger and distrust of the oil and transport companies, in their willingness to sacrifice lives and safety for profit, has led to a petition and Facebook pages demanding the immediate grounding of the Super Pumas. One of those, "Destroy the Super Pumas," has acquired over 36,000 likes. A demonstration has been called for September 3 in Aberdeen.

In 2009, a Super Puma disintegrated midair following a gearbox failure which detached the helicopter's main rotor blades. Sixteen passengers and crew were killed. The 2009 disaster, the worst loss of life in the North Sea since the 1988 Piper Alpha explosion which killed 226 people, followed a series of non-fatal events with the aircraft. The incidents emerged in an environment of increasingly aggressive cost cutting amongst the main three rival helicopter companies.

An Air Accidents Investigation Branch report revealed that a magnetic particle had been found in the gearbox a week prior to the crash and maintenance had been authorized, but later cancelled. Metal fatigue caused the gearbox failure.

In a tragic coincidence, family members of those killed in 2009 heard of last Friday's accident just after a relatives' meeting had been held in Aberdeen. Wilma Doyle, whose husband Raymond died in the 2009 crash, told the *Daily Record* :

"We thought after the first crash and all these safety recommendations were made that this would never happen again and here we are.

"My daughters and I were in Aberdeen on Friday at the meeting for all the families and then we came back and heard about this... Our meeting was the first time in

four years the families have got together to speak about what we have gone through."

Ms. Doyle pointed to the legal barriers erected by the Scottish authorities to defend the oil industry from a legal investigation. She noted, "The procurator fiscal ruled it wasn't in the public interest to launch criminal proceedings under health and safety legislation. We're still in the dark as to why there won't be a criminal prosecution."

At the meeting, the families were informed that the Fatal Accident Inquiry into the disaster, which still has not been opened, will now be delayed until 2014. Ms. Doyle's daughter Caroline commented this week on Facebook:

"We're hitting a brick wall between the companies and the crown office who state that it's not in the public interest to tell us anything.

"Why is no one being prosecuted? Who gave the orders to fly it after discovering fragments of metal? Who was to blame given Bond and Eurocopter had a misunderstanding resulting in the wrong checks being carried out?"

In 2012 two EC225 Super Pumas ditched, one 30 miles off the coast of Aberdeen, another off Shetland. Both ditchings were attributed to "potentially catastrophic" gearbox failures. Following the second ditching, the entire fleet of 16 EC225's, some 20 percent of the entire North Sea helicopter fleet, was grounded pending remedial work on cracks in their gearshafts. Earlier this month CHC resumed flights with the EC225s, while Bristow's intends to have completed repairs by October. Bond, the third major operator, has not set a date for the craft's return.

Other comments suggested that the recently lifted EC225 flight ban contributed to additional pressures on the remaining aircraft. Workers reported increased loadings on flights, making evacuation more difficult in a ditching and increasing strain on the remaining aircraft.

Prior to last week's crash, the Super Puma failures were the subject of a campaign by the industry to overcome growing alarm at the aircraft's safety record.

In June *Oil & Gas UK*, "the voice of the offshore industry", published the results of a survey that concluded, of 1,604 workers questioned, two thirds reported reduced confidence in the EC225. Rather than introduce modern aircraft, the industry has instead

sought to massage concerns by "engaging and communicating to the workforce" via a Helicopter Safety Steering Group (HSSG) offshoot of *Oil & Gas UK*, incorporating the trade unions.

A cruder indication of the industry's attitude surfaced in the Aberdeen based *Press and Journal* which reported a talk given early August on the Borgstein Dolphin rig, at the time of the EC225's re-introduction. Leading executives of Total and CHC had flown on an EC225 to promote the aircraft's record. One arrogantly told oil workers "If you can't live with the risk don't work offshore." The unnamed executive continued, "At some point we have to put our big-boy pants on and say...'we believe'".

On hearing of the latest crash, the HSSG recommended grounding all Super Pumas. A similar move in 2012, resulted in hundreds of oil workers being stranded in the North Sea after their rotations had ended, as no replacement aircraft were brought in. The current move, should it be sustained, will have the same consequences.

For their part, the trade unions, Rail Maritime and Transport and Unite, have made clear that their main concern is getting the industry running again, dissipating workers anger and rebuilding confidence in the Super Pumas. RMT leader Bob Crow complained in the aftermath of last week's crash "RMT and Unite have worked with all sectors of the industry to address the concerns of our members and rebuild... confidence. Last night's events have undone all that work and we anticipate an outpouring of anger."



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