

**Phoenix Electronic News Gathering Pilot Interviews  
August 14, 2007 at Westcor Aviation, Scottsdale, Arizona**

**National Transportation Safety Board**

Kristi Dunks, Air Safety Investigator  
Sandy Rowlett, Deputy Chief Operational Factors Division  
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**Federal Aviation Administration**

Aviation Safety  
Eric West, Air Safety Investigator  
Dan Strawbridge, Air Traffic Safety Inspector

**Local News Media Pilots**

Paul Alukonis- Westcor Aviation  
Connie Sullivan- CBS 5  
Scott Clifton- CBS 5  
Don Hooper- Fox 10  
Jamaica Bergstrom- Channel 12  
Josh Johnson- CBS 5  
Rick Crabbs- Fox 10  
Brian Kelley- ABC 15  
Bruce Haffner- TV 3  
Leonard Espinoza- Channel 12  
Matt Uhl- CBS 5

The news channel pilots for the Phoenix area agreed to meet with investigators regarding the July 27, 2007, midair collision between two news helicopters over downtown Phoenix. The group reported that they are a close-knit community and are in communication daily. All pilots except for Channel 15 operate out of the same hangar. Channel 15 operates out of a nearby hangar.

The pilots reported the following procedures are in place and effective within the Phoenix area.

**Class Bravo Letter of Agreement**

The media pilots have a letter of agreement (LOA) with the air traffic control tower for Phoenix International Airport. Through this letter of agreement, media pilots are provided standardized procedures to facilitate their movement in and out of the airspace. It also reduces the workload for the controllers. Helicopter operators were given numerous drafts of the LOA asking for their input. PHX ATCT is the only facility with an LOA like "Sharp Echo" which also provides east/west transitions in addition to exit

and entry into the Class B. Other tower facilities, like Falcon and Scottsdale have LOAs but only for noise abatement procedures.

In addition to the LOA, the pilots indicated that they have given familiarization flights to the tower controllers in order to give them a better understanding of helicopter operations. In conjunction, pilots have been able to tour the air traffic control tower and understand the operations from the air traffic control tower controller's perspective. This relationship has proven invaluable in successful working relationships with the controllers.

### **Annual Meetings**

#### Forest Service

The media pilots attend an annual meeting with local Forest Service personnel to facilitate their operations in and around forest fires. Through these meetings, pilots and their dispatchers learn how to obtain permission to operate within the area of the forest fires, without causing traffic flow problems with fire fighting personnel.

#### Mesa Police Department

The Mesa Police Department holds an annual meeting in which helicopter pilots statewide attend. The pilots include law enforcement, media, emergency medical services, and flight schools. Through this meeting, pilots are able to meet other pilots and procedures are gone over to standardize operations. In addition, air traffic controllers are also in attendance.

### **General Operational Procedures**

The pilots indicated that when they receive a call of an event, the helicopter(s) is dispatched. The first pilot to arrive on scene establishes his position. As additional pilots enter the area, the pilots transmit between each other of their altitudes and position. If someone is going to change position, they transmit how and where they are changing. In the case of the accident flight, the other news pilots flying believed that the communication was adequate between the two accident pilots. When the pilot is broadcasting live, he advises the pilots on the local frequency, and dependent on the length of the broadcast, will also notify the tower. During the broadcast, the pilot continues to monitor the frequencies.

The pilots indicated that car chases were not a common occurrence in the Phoenix metro area. Many had been discontinued by the Phoenix Police Department due to safety concerns. Over the year leading up to the accident, the pilots had covered about two car chases over the last 8 months, both commenced the week of the accident.

Each operator flies about 1,200 hours per year. Except for Channel 12, all operators use a combination pilot/reporter. Channel 12 uses a photographer/reporter.

All helicopters are equipped with a photographer who operates the camera, and the pilot has access to a monitor that is mounted near his instrument panel. Throughout the flight, the pilots scan the monitor as they would their flight instruments. The monitor is used to signal to the pilot when they are live and to assist in positioning the helicopter for the best camera angle. The pilots indicated that they do not tell the photographer how to film and that they will respond to the photographer, based on what he needs. There were times when the pilot would have another person in the left seat but that person created more of a workload than help because of additional information the pilot needed to provide.

The pilots also stated that they had never been involved in a NMAC with another helicopter but they have been involved in a NMAC with a fixed wing aircraft typically if the fixed wing made an early turn or something unexpected.

During missions involving the police helicopter, the media helicopters remain 500 feet above the police helicopter. There is constant chatter on the discreet frequency (123.025) regarding positions. There are times when a pilot will lose sight of another helicopter over the city because the helicopter blends into the ground clutter making it difficult to discern. At night they use more vertical separation and 99 percent of the time, the pilots will fly with the landing light illuminated to allow others to see them.

### **Safety Suggestions**

The pilots suggested the following safety improvements:

1. High visibility main rotor and tail rotor blades
2. LED anti-collision strobe lights
3. Improved position lights
4. Annual meetings
5. HAI support

The pilots did not have any further suggestions to improve their operational procedures.