

## Chopper training problem stems from military's "decade of darkness" - expert

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HALIFAX - Tight restrictions on flying hours and the lack of a local simulator are to blame for training problems facing Canada's search-and-rescue helicopter pilots, say retired military officers.

A draft report of a military investigation into the crash of a search-and-rescue helicopter 18 months ago says the skills of pilots have "degraded" due to inadequate training.

Retired air force colonel Larry McWha, who commanded a fleet of Sea Kings in the 1990s, says the problems stem from the military's "decade of darkness" from 1993 to 2003, when decisions were made not to buy a training simulator for the pilots and problems with the supply of spare parts started to emerge.

McWha, who has been a consultant for the Cormorant's manufacturer, Agusta-Westland, says Canada should have its own simulators where pilots can practice manoeuvres in "a safe and realistic environment" at times when the Cormorants are grounded.

"I believe that had we had simulators, that would have led to proper training regardless of the aircraft problem," he said. "You would have put people through the simulators more frequently."

He estimates the cost of a simulator - which would be provided by a separate company - at about \$100 million.

The draft report, obtained by The Canadian Press, says the pilot was "not qualified" and was using "inappropriate" flying methods when the Cormorant plunged nosedown into the Atlantic during a training exercise on July 13, 2006, off the coast of Canso, N.S.

The military's Directorate of Flight Safety completed the draft document last April. The report can still be revised before it is finalized and released, which is expected in the next several weeks.

The report says pilot training had steadily deteriorated in the months leading up to the crash and "the overall proficiency of the CH149 crews was degraded" due to restrictions on training times.

In the current training system Canadian pilots are flown to Royal Air Force Benson for simulator training. At the time of the crash, the pilots were required to go to England every 12 to 18 months.

The shortage in training has worsened in recent years because of problems with parts supplies and increased maintenance of the rear rotor hubs.

The draft report says that for 18 months leading up to the crash, there were two-hour flying limits on training missions because of the need to check for cracks on the rear rotor.

The inspections were "compounded by ongoing parts shortages" and had a "significant impact on the overall proficiency of the Cormorant crews," says the report.

A former officer who participated in the efforts to set up the original 1993 contract to buy 50 EH101 maritime helicopters say training simulators would have been purchased if the Liberal government of prime minister Jean Chretien hadn't cancelled the original purchase.

Andre Elieff, a retired air force major, worked in the Ottawa project office for the original Cormorant purchase in 1989 and 1990, and recalls a flight simulator was part of the package.

"We just assumed there was going to be one and we were going to take advantage of that because of the savings and the extreme training you can get in a safe way," he said in an interview.

The vision was for a large fleet, where there would be a single set of technicians, a large supply of spare parts and a simulator for training, Elieff said.

What emerged in its wake was the separate purchase of 15 Cormorant search-and-rescue helicopters in 1998 from Agusta-Westland, with a separate contract for maintenance and support with IMP Group of Halifax.

"They dusted off the work we'd done and said 'OK, we're getting the Cormorants.' ... They went off and running and bought 15 and there was no longer money in the pot for a simulator," Elieff said.

He added that in 1998, the government was also able to argue that 15 aircraft was too small a fleet to justify the simulator.

Retired lieutenant general Al DeQuetteville, who was the chief of the air staff in 1998, recalled the emphasis for the \$790-million purchase of search-and-rescue helicopters was on the "lowest cost."

"Everything you did was a tradeoff," he recalled. "If you wanted new capability, something had to go to get it. ... That was the reality we lived with in those days."

In 2006, when investigators were conducting interviews for the draft report into the crash, they talked to instructors in the United Kingdom who told them Canada's search-and-rescue pilots were no longer measuring up, according to the report.

"The simulator staff noted that in comparison to other ... crews, the Cormorant crews were performing to a lower level than other operators," wrote the investigators.

The air force has refused to comment on all aspects of the draft report, saying it is still being reviewed, and they will only speak once a final report is published.

Ken Rowe, the chief executive of IMP, said parts shortages occurred due to challenges Agusta-Westland faced buying from sub contractors, but the delays are improving.

"The situation is getting better and there's a lot of effort going on now between the maintenance company and Agusta-Westland to improve things to a satisfactory level to keep the aircraft flying at all times," he said.

The troubles with the tail rotor hubs has resulted in a redesign, he added, and he's hopeful there will be improvements.

However, McWha said the need for a simulator will remain.

"We need a place to practice complex procedures in a safe environment."

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