

**MH-53, SERIAL NUMBER (S/N) 68-10363
551st SPECIAL OPERATIONS SQUADRON (SOS),
58th SPECIAL OPERATIONS WING
KIRTLAND AIR FORCE BASE (AFB), NEW MEXICO
10 JANUARY 2002**

On 10 January 2002, at approximately 0328 (all times are local), the mishap aircraft (MA), a MH-53, S/N 68-10363, crashed approximately 22 miles north northwest of Durango CO. The crew on the MA consisted of six people, the mission pilot, copilot, two flight engineers, and two aerial gunners. Also on board were a civilian search and rescue (SAR) responder, and the Cessna pilot whose earlier accident precipitated the SAR mission. The MA was one of two MH-53s conducting SAR operations at the request of civilian authorities. The mishap crew (MC) and civilian passengers suffered only minor injuries and egressed without incident. The MA was severely damaged upon impact with the loss valued at 5,303,376.00 dollars. The crash site is on national forest land and no claims for damage have been or are expected. The helicopter has been recovered and released by the AIB to be reconditioned, and Kirtland AFB environmentalists are working with the San Juan Forest officials to thoroughly clean the site.

The MC initially planned a 2-ship night tactical training mission sortie. Prior to starting engines, the crews were tasked with a real-world SAR mission. An MC-130P from Kirtland AFB was also tasked to provide air refueling support. A civilian Cessna 172 with three persons on board had crashed earlier in the day, injuring two of the persons on board. The helicopters were reconfigured for SAR while cursory mission planning was taking place, and both MH-53s took off at 1930. The helicopters proceeded to Animas Airpark (4 miles from Durango CO) where local authorities briefed selected members from each helicopter. The MA also boarded a civilian SAR responder. The MA conducted search operations in the area identified by local authorities. After searching approximately three hours, the MA then returned to Animas Airpark 2330 and picked up the mishap Cessna pilot. His role was to narrow the search area by identifying terrain he flew over prior to his crash. At approximately 0300 the MC located the Cessna. While on final approach to the Cessna, the MA crashed in a gully less than a mile from the Cessna. All eight persons on board the helicopter safely egressed and established a campsite.

The accident was the result of pilot error brought on by a combination of fatigue and channelized attention. The aircraft was operating at the edge of its performance envelope and the crew had performed an extended duty day. Under these conditions, errors in judging speed and altitude made recovery impossible when the helicopter was confronted with an unexpected barrier.

Under 10 U.S.C. 2254(d) any opinion of the accident investigators as to the cause of, or the factors contributing to, the accident set forth in the accident investigation report may not be considered as evidence in any civil or criminal proceeding arising from an aircraft accident, nor may such information be considered an admission of liability of the United States or by any person referred to in those conclusions or statements.