

Testimony of John Whiddon
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Madame Chair, Ranking Member Cantwell and members of the Committee. My name is John Whiddon. I am a retired US Coast Guard Commander and former helicopter pilot living in Kodiak, AK. I flew helicopters in Sitka in South East Alaska and in Kodiak and the Aleutian Chain on search and rescue and other Coast Guard missions for over 20 years. Over the course of my career, I became very familiar with the Cold Bay region as I had numerous occasions to fly in and out of the Cold Bay airport. I appreciate the invitation to testify today before your committee. Please accept this testimony for your hearing record.

I will be happy to answer any questions about this testimony and my experience as a Coast Guard pilot.

SAR case to locate Pen Air crash near Cold Bay December 13 -14, 1980.

The following statement is my recollection of the events surrounding the Pen Air crash near Cold Bay, Alaska on December 13-14, 1980. This statement in no way reflects the opinion or position of the US Coast Guard.

In December, 1980, I was a Lieutenant and HH3F helicopter pilot assigned to Coast Guard Air Station Kodiak. I had accumulated almost 2000 hours of helicopter time and was considered an experienced Alaska pilot. Two months prior on October 4, 1980, I participated in the rescue of 522 passengers from the sinking M/V Prinsendam, 120 miles offshore from Yakutat which required a multi-national response by Coast Guard, Air Force and Canadian Forces. Up to that point in my career, I had responded to several plane crashes in Louisiana and Alaska, including recovering victims from the Lynyrd Skynyrd crash near Jackson, Mississippi. This particular case involving the Pen Air plane near Cold Bay was the third plane crash that I responded to in my first year in Alaska.

Coast Guard Air Station Kodiak received notice of an overdue Pen Air flight with a pilot and three passengers who had been enroute from King Cove to Cold Bay on December 13, 1980. The report indicated that Pen Air flew to King Cove to medevac a seriously injured fishermen with an amputated foot. Following the overdue notice, satellites picked up an Emergency Locator Transmitter (ELT), somewhere in the vicinity of Cold Bay. A helo was launched to Cold Bay and searched all day in a heavy snowstorm and was unable to locate plane crash. Although the ELT was still transmitting, due to the heavy snow and low visibility, the crew was unable to locate the plane crash. The ELT signal was difficult to pinpoint most likely due to atmospheric conditions. It should be noted that no civilian or military aircraft were equipped with GPS navigation at this time. Navigation equipment was limited to Loran C, VOR/DME or in many cases in Alaska, visual navigation based on local knowledge.

My crew and I were assigned to fly down to Cold Bay in a C-130 to relieve the first helo crew and continue the search after they ran out of crew mission time. After arriving in Cold Bay, we quickly

briefed with the on scene crew, loaded our gear, picked up a State Trooper and then took off to search for the ELT.

Although it was still snowing heavily, the visibility had picked up to just under a mile. Within an hour of searching, we were able to pin point the ELT with our Automatic Direction Finder (ADF) and shortly after spotted the plane about 7 miles from the end of the runway. We landed on the tundra approximately 50 yards from the plane crash. The plane appeared to have impacted the ground in a level altitude and there was no indication of a fire. The cockpit windows and side window were broken, but the airplane was mostly intact and it was apparent that the pilot had flown into the ground.

All the occupants were deceased, but still sitting upright in their seats. There was no blood or visible trauma to any of the victims, so their death was the result of sudden stoppage and ground impact. The Trooper directed us to remove the bodies which proved difficult and took considerable time since they were frozen in place in a seated position. After my crew and I extricated the bodies, we had stack them on the ramp at the back of the helicopter. I recall later looking back from the cockpit at the tangle of arms and legs, all pointing in different directions – a memory that has lasted 37 years. The Trooper also requested we remove the engine which was partially detached. My mechanic removed a few mount bolts and with help dragged the engine to the helo where we used the hoist to lift the engine up into the cabin.

Once all the victims and the engine were on board, we flew the short flight back to Cold Bay and unloaded the bodies and engine. The snow had continued to fall all day and the weather was forecast to deteriorate, so we quickly refueled and took off for the four hour return trip back to Kodiak. By the time we got to Port Heiden and made the right turn to follow the river through to Aniakchak Pass on the Shelikof Straits side, it was almost completely dark and snowing heavily. I had let my co-pilot fly so I could navigate through the narrow pass. I had flown through Aniakchak Pass on several occasions and was familiar with the ground terrain and general course to make the West to East transit. On this flight, we had to fly through the pass at 200 feet because of low visibility and to maintain visual contact with the ground. We also were building ice on the airframe and windows, so a higher altitude was not an option. We had on board a new (at that time) color radar, which did not operate well in snow, so we had to feel our way through the pass at fifty knots which took approximately 25 minutes of low altitude flying and careful navigation to avoid a wrong turn into dead end valleys. Once we came through into the Shelikof Straits, we set a course to Sitkinak Island at the south end of Kodiak and then followed the east coast of Kodiak back to the Air Station in the dark. The rest of the flight was uneventful.

At the time of this recovery flight, I was unaware of any efforts to build a road to King Cove. In hindsight, this SAR case to recover four crash victims could have been avoided if there had been ground transportation between King Cove and Cold Bay. In addition to the loss of lives, the two helo crews and a C-130 crew were put at risk as they flew many hours in heavy snow and high winds to locate the crash site and recover the bodies.

Thank you for this opportunity to present this statement.

John Whiddon

Kodiak, Alaska