IN AFGHANISTAN, A SERIES OF SMALL ERRORS AND BAD LUCK KILLED FIVE IN A HELICOPTER CRASH.

By Brian W. Everstine, Pentagon Editor

For those working at the headquarters of Operation Resolute Support in Afghanistan, the five-minute helicopter flight from Kabul Airport to the NATO headquarters in Afghanistan was as regular as a subway ride.

That all changed on Oct. 11, 2015, when a series of miscalculations, bad luck, inaccurate assumptions, and a soccer game caused a Royal Air Force Puma transport helicopter to crash, killing five of the nine people onboard, including two US airmen.

That day, Air Force Col. Laurel M. Burkel, the chief of Air Mobility Command’s Fuel Efficiency Division—one of four survivors of the Puma crash—was preparing for a routine meeting with an Afghan colonel. Burkel, who at the time was assigned to an international exchange position in Ottawa, Canada, deployed to Afghanistan in late 2015 as part of the training mission to set up the Afghan air force’s personnel system.

During her meeting, the two leaders were planning to discuss revisions to a manning document that would help form the force structure of the AAF’s A-29 light attack air-
craft, MD-530 helicopters, and mobility aircrews.

Normally, she would have taken an American UH-60 Black Hawk or contractor helicopter, but this time Burkel and five other passengers piled into one of two British Puma Mk2 transport helicopters.

“I thought it was really cool, to get into a British helo,” Burkel said in an interview with Air Force Magazine.

There were four flights planned for the helos throughout the day, and this trip was toward the end of their schedule. The prior flights had no problems, and at 4:17 p.m. local time the two-ship, each helicopter loaded with six passengers, took off and headed toward the headquarters’ makeshift landing zone: a soccer field.

On approach, the pilots realized a game was being played on their landing zone, and about 40 people were gathered on the field, so the choppers first tried a go-around. A minute later, the game was still going. A soldier was sent out to try to clear the field, but it was taking too long.

“Doesn’t look like those footballers are getting out of the way. Can you just confirm that they will be doing that?” the first aircraft radioed.

“[Operations is] sending someone as we speak,” the second responded.

The helos entered an orbit and the pilots worked to avoid certain airspace, such as that around the Afghan presidential palace and the Ministry of Defense. As the helicopters approached the Ministry of Defense building, their flight paths diverged and the second helicopter lost sight of the first. The second helicopter, carrying Burkel, made a hard right turn to regain the visual, and its tail rotor hit a large tether used to hold down a Persistent Threat Detection System aerostat floating 2,500 feet above the base.

Aerostats—blimps tethered to the ground that are set up to detect incoming threats and carry communications
equipment—are posted around the base and are a constant, stationary threat to aircraft. Even though the tether has flags to show its position to aircraft, the closest ones were 30 feet below the helo and 170 feet above. The pilot couldn’t see the aerostat in his position at the time of the strike, the official investigation into the mishap states.

The aircrews and operations center officials knew that although hitting a tether is a large, potentially harmful mistake, the line is designed to break off and not severely damage what hit it.

But this time, the damage was severe.

SIX-SECOND FALL

The long tether is just .58 inches in diameter, with rubber encasing fiber-optics and copper power cables. It has to be strong enough to hold the aerostat to its position but not unbreakable. During a prior near miss at the same base, pilots inspected the cable to make sure they wouldn’t be in danger.

“The crews were assured that the tether was frangible and designed to break in the event of a rotor blade strike,” the British Defense Safety Authority service inquiry report states.

Several NATO helicopters had hit these tethers before, and in each case the tether broke and the helicopter landed safely. In one instance, the crew didn’t even know it hit the tether, the report says.

But when Burkel’s helicopter hit the tether, the line hit both sides of the Puma’s tail cone, the tail rotor drive shaft, and the helicopter’s high frequency radio antenna. One passenger reported hearing a pop and feeling a jerk, the report states. The crew tried for some 17 seconds to regain control, but the rotor stopped moving, and the Puma started to roll. It took six seconds for the Puma to fall. In that time the pilots were able to shut down the engines and avoid crashing into any nearby structures.

“Miraculously” there was not more damage on the ground, Burkel said. “It’s amazing we didn’t hit a building.”

The helicopter crashed between buildings in the middle of the Resolute Support compound. Two USAF airmen—Maj. Phyllis J. Pelky, of Rio Rancho, N.M., and MSgt. Gregory T. Kuhse, of Kalamazoo, Mich., were killed. Pelky had been permanently assigned to the US Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs, Colo., while Kuhse had been deployed from the 3rd Manpower Requirements Squadron at Scott AFB, Ill.

RAF pilots Flight Lt. Alan Scott, of 33 Squadron RAF, and Flight Lt. Geraint Roberts, of 230 Squadron were also killed. Gordon Emin, a French civilian contractor, also died in the crash.

Burkel suffered a broken neck.

The base has erected a small marble memorial honoring those who died at the scene of the crash.

Rescue forces came immediately, while the other Puma stayed above the scene. The pilots’ quick thinking to turn off the engines meant there was no immediate postcrash fire. The situation could have been worse, and more people would have died “had we ignited,” Burkel said.

Within 15 seconds, rescuers went into the wreckage to pull out the survivors. For an hour-and-a-half, rescuers worked to extricate everyone from the helicopter.

“None of us could have pulled ourselves out,” Burkel said.

The fuel bladder ruptured, causing 350 kilograms (771 pounds) of fuel to spill through the helicopter and across the scene. Rescuers said they worked in ankle-deep puddles next to the wreckage.

Though Burkel has little memory of the crash, she said she can still smell fuel on her uniform, which had to be cut off of her, and even on the passport she carried.

The dozens of troops and civilians that immediately responded faced trauma themselves, including some who
were treated for heavy exposure to particulates from fire extinguishers. A team of airmen, including Maj. Gen. Scott D. West, ran out of their offices once they heard the crash. West even grabbed his sidearm because at first he thought the base was under attack. At the time, West was commander of the 9th Air and Space Expeditionary Task Force-Afghanistan and deputy commander of air for US Forces-Afghanistan.

The airmen who responded were awarded the Joint Service Commendation Medal. Two Marines, Capt. Trey Kennedy and Gunnery Sgt. Geann Pereira, have been awarded the Navy and Marine Corps Medal.

However, those who died or were injured in the crash have not received recognition, Burkel said. Through the process of recovering from injuries in the crash, she was shocked to learn that because of Defense Department regulations, the passengers of the aircraft are not eligible to receive the Purple Heart. These are regulations she is still working to clarify, for both this crash and other incidents, such as the 2015 C-130 crash in Afghanistan that killed 11, including six US airmen.

SAFETY RECOMMENDATIONS

The official Royal Air Force report determined that the catastrophic failure of the tail rotor drive shaft was the main cause of the crash, stemming from the impact of the tether. The pilots’ loss of situational awareness caused the tether strike and contributed to the crash, the report states.

To this day, when Burkel thinks about the crash, she always goes back to the initial decision of where to land.

“Why the hell are we landing in a soccer field?” she asks.

Following the crash and subsequent investigation, the RAF made a long list of recommendations to the Resolute Support leadership, to prevent another crash from occurring. The suggestions include reviewing the wisdom of using a soccer field as a landing zone.

The Defense Safety Authority is “certain that the recommendations for NATO Headquarters Resolute Support will make helicopter operations in this part of Afghanistan safer,” the report states. “The accident serves as a salutary reminder to all aircrew of the importance of lookout, crew resource management, communication, and formation discipline.”

The recommendations call on NATO to study the feasibility of using the field as the main landing zone, and ensure in the future that there are “robust deconfliction measures” in place.

Even after the crash and the extended review, however, helicopters flying toward the NATO headquarters still use the field and need to look out for people playing soccer before they can land.

Burkel has largely recovered, but is still receiving physical therapy for her injuries.

A marble memorial plaque at Kabul Arpt., Afghanistan, is dedicated to the five people killed in the crash.