

'My stomach dropped out from under me' Crew recount chopper crash as Iroquois limps home

By Chad Lucas / Staff Reporter

Five days after a celebrated departure, HMCS Iroquois slid quietly back into Halifax Harbour Saturday morning to a host of unanswered questions.

Only military inspectors and media marked the ship's arrival at 12 Wing Shearwater, where a crane removed a damaged Sea King helicopter.

The warship, which was headed to the Persian Gulf, was forced to turn around near the Grand Banks on Thursday after the 40-year-old Sea King crashed into the ship's deck just after takeoff.

Two crew members suffered minor injuries.

[Number of qualified technicians has dwindled](#)

The mishap has renewed calls to replace the aging, much-maligned helicopter fleet and stoked debate about the state of Canada's military resources.

But the chief of the Sea King crew on the Iroquois said the event was simply an accident.

"Flying a large helicopter from a small deck is a risky business," Maj. Todd Smart said.

Maj. Smart and the ship's commanding officer, Capt. Paul Maddison, described what happened Thursday morning.

The Iroquois had just pulled away from supply ship HMCS Preserver when the chopper took off around 11 a.m. It was on a training flight to practise landings on the destroyer's deck.

The Sea King had just reached high hover – the pilot pauses seven to 10 metres above the deck to check engines and instrument gauges – when the aircraft appeared to lose power.

It fell quickly and landed hard on the deck. The impact snapped the right pontoon, and the helicopter rolled over on its right side. The aircraft's tail and top rotor blades also struck the deck, Maj. Smart said.

The chopper crew chief was on the bridge, watching on a television monitor. "As you would expect, my stomach dropped out from under me," he said.

The quick reactions of the pilot and ship response teams kept damage to a minimum, Maj. Smart said.

"It's all something we train for and it's all something that happened perfectly," he said.

All four people on board the craft walked away.

Capt. Maddison had praise for his crew's reaction. "The response of my ship's company to the emergency was superb."

The incident assured them they could handle anything, he said. "The self-confidence of the crew . . . is now higher than it has ever been, so I suppose that's the silver lining in this cloud."

The battered Sea King still lay on its side as the Iroquois docked Saturday.

The aircraft's tail was almost completely shorn off, and the top rotor was gone.

An engine was exposed and a pilot's side window was smashed.

The ship had minor damage. The deck and one hangar door were dented, the grey metal beneath the paint exposed. A railing and fence on the ship's right side were torn away, and a set of metal steps was bent.

It should only take two or three days to repair the ship, Capt. Maddison said.

There was no official word on when or if the Sea King could be saved. But a retired colonel and Sea King pilot said he believes the aircraft will fly again.

"I don't think there's any doubt," Lee Myrhaugen said at dockside. "We don't have the resources to just discard them."

He rejected suggestions that the incident was an embarrassment to the military or a poor reflection on the Sea King fleet.

"This type of operation . . . is not without risk," he said. "It's one of those things that unfortunately happens from time to time on military operations."

A team of 10 flight safety investigators will look into the crash and interview the crew.



Ted Pritchard / Herald Photo

The Sea King Helicopter that crashed onto the deck of the HMCS Iroquois last week is hoisted by a crane Saturday at the Shearwater jetty in Eastern Passage. A flight safety team from National Defence Headquarters was on hand to perform a preliminary inspection of the aircraft prior to its removal.



Ted Pritchard / Herald Photo

Iroquois captain Paul Maddison, right, flanked by Maj. Todd Smart, explains what happened in the moments leading up to the Sea King crash.

A team of 10 night safety investigators will look into the crash and interview the crew.

The Iroquois was headed to the naval dockyard once the chopper was removed. Sailors will have a day home with their families today before preparing for the vessel's return to sea.

Morale on the ship is high and the crew is anxious to head out again, Capt. Maddison said.

"The crew, universally, has told me they wish to get back underway . . . with the business of what the government of Canada has directed us to do," he said.

Military officials couldn't say when the Iroquois will leave again or whether it will have another Sea King on board.

"I'm quite uncertain right now as to whether I would sail with one, or perhaps one would join me later," Capt. Maddison said.

The Sea King squadron commander, Col. David Martin, told reporters Friday it's yet to be determined whether the air force can round up another helicopter and a detachment of 19 people.

The crew of the downed chopper definitely won't be headed back out on the Iroquois; they'll remain in Shearwater for the investigation. The Iroquois is slated to become the command-and-control vessel for the Canadian head of an international task force once it reaches the Persian Gulf. HMCS Fredericton is scheduled to depart next Wednesday.

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