

Flood Commission Submission  
by Brent Hall  
11<sup>th</sup> March 2011

**Emergency Services Helicopter Tasking**

I have been operating large helicopters and conducting search and rescue operations on the coast of Qld for the past 18 years, including 10 years as a Black Hawk pilot and Flying Instructor for the ADF. For the past 8 years I have been flying as part of the Emergency Services Helicopter network, at various bases, and I am currently the Check and Training Captain at Maroochydhore.

Our Maroochydhore based organisation operates two IFR twin engine, winch equipped BK117 helicopters, one out of the Maroochydhore Base and one at the Bundaberg Base. The twin engine aircraft are crewed 24/7 with a pilot, a winch capable crewman and a winch capable Paramedic. A third smaller single engine Bell 206L, also winch equipped, is based at the Maroochydhore Base and is used when one of the larger machines is offline for maintenance. We have a contract with the State Government to provide helicopter support to the Emergency Services. There are specific tasking guidelines but generally the Queensland Emergency Medical Services (QEMS) Coordination Centre (QCC) controls all of the helicopter and Fixed wing (RFDS) assets. The coordinator in the QCC that makes the decision to use any of the Rotary or Fixed Wing assets is a Doctor.

The purpose of this submission is to raise the need for a review of tasking and co-ordination practices and policies of the Emergency Services Helicopter network. As I was flying one of the helicopters during the Flood crisis period, I would like to relate some factual information of our tasking on the day of the Lockyer Valley situation and the following day, in an effort to highlight possible inefficiencies and prompt such a review.

Monday 10<sup>th</sup> January

On the afternoon of Monday 10<sup>th</sup> January 2011, at 1455 hours, our Maroochydhore based twin engine helicopter, was tasked by the QCC to extract a father and four children from a camping ground at Amamoor. Other people were remaining at the camping ground, as there was no threat to rising flood water. The father and children were not injured and no intervention was required by our Paramedic. The helicopter was then tasked at 1626 hours to conduct a hospital transfer of two patients from Gympie Hospital to Nambour Hospital. Both patients were stable and no intervention was required by our Paramedic.

At no time on Monday did the QCC request our twin engine aircraft to assist in the Lockyer Valley or at other crisis situations. The QCC did not ask if we could provide our back up aircraft to assist. Our back up helicopter, the Bell 206L, was available and a crew could have been found to man that helicopter..

Flight time from Maroochydore to the Lockyer Valley is approx 30-40mins for the twin engine helicopter and approx 40-50mins for the Bell 206L

External to our organisation, a non rescue helicopter based at the Maroochydore Airport, that wasn't equipped with a winch, was tasked by the Queensland Fire and Rescue Service at approx 1630hours, to move fire officers around the Lockyer Valley.

Near last light, after the Gympie to Nambour transfer, one of our two twin engine helicopter was placed unserviceable, with a minor fault that would not have inhibited the ability of the aircraft to conduct rescue operations had the fault developed during such a mission.

Tuesday 11<sup>th</sup> January

The QCC tasked the Maroochydore base to Imbil at approx 0430hrs. Instead of taking the back up aircraft, it was decided to wait until the twin engine helicopter was serviceable. Engineers had already commenced working on the unserviceable twin engine helicopter.

The Maroochydore based twin engine helicopter was serviceable at approx 0800hours. In addition to the Bundaberg based twin engine helicopter, the QCC were also informed that we had an extra crew and were now manning the Bell 206L (the manning of this helicopter was conducted without request from the QCC, but from a perceived need by the organisation).

Although the QCC said they had a huge list of tasks the operator said they were still trying to prioritise the tasks and that he couldn't get hold of the Coordinator, so he could make a decision.

None of the three aircraft were tasked until 1015hours, over two hours after the QCC were informed that all three of our organisations aircraft were available and winch equipped.

The Maroochydore twin engine helicopter was tasked and subsequently preceded to the Kilcoy area to pick up a lady in labour. The Paramedic said this was a necessary task from his medical point of view.

Below are the comments extracted from an e-mail, from the pilot of our twin engine helicopter on Tues 11<sup>th</sup> January 2011;

*After finally completing the tasking we received at 1015 to the Kilcoy area, we went to Redcliffe Airport for a refuel at Heliwork. Enroute to Redcliffe at approx 1415 we heard reports on the QPS radio channel that several people in the Caboolture area were trapped by rising flood water, we contacted the QPS ourselves and asked was there anything we could do to help given we were in the area? The QPS said that they needed our help and gave us details of where the people were stranded, we contacted QCC and asked to be released to undertake some flood relief work for the QPS. Initially they said no that they wanted us to go to Proston, South Burnett to retrieve a male patient with chest pain. We said are you sure that's what you want us to do given what was happening in Caboolture, QCC replied that they wanted us to go to Proston. At this time I said I would call them back, once I had hung up, the crew discussed the phone call and situation and decided to call back QCC and again try to get releases given the seriousness of what was happening down the road. The call was made and eventually they released us to go to Caboolture but only after what was a heated*

*discussion. On arrival in the Caboolture area we ended up winching one home owner off her roof and found several other people stranded who did not want us to lift them out.*

*At no time during the day were we asked by either QCC, QPS or the Flood Co-Ordination people to assist in what was going on in other areas in Brisbane, Ipswich, Gatton, Toowoomba etc where it certainly appears that we may have been better placed to offer assistance? Given we had a fully serviceable winch equipped BK117 helicopter available from 0800 - last light on the 11/01/11 it was not well utilized asset in my opinion, especially in light of the now very public statements from EMQ about the size of the problem.*

I was flying the Bell 206L on Tues 11<sup>th</sup> March and was also tasked at 1015hours. Our task was to a non-urgent chest pain at Imbil. In the middle of the day we were told that there were no more tasks and that we could return to the Maroochydore Base. Later in the day we were tasked to Esk to transfer three patients to Brisbane. We could only take two patients and while at the Esk hospital the Westpac Lifesaver helicopter briefly landed. I asked the Westpac Lifesaver EC135 helicopter via phone if he could transport our third patient. He told me that he had to return to Ipswich as he had more priority tasks and was required to conduct some more winching operations.

The QCC appeared to be overwhelmed during the afternoon and the twin engine aircraft was unable make contact on the phone. Without any further guidance from the QCC our Maroochydore twin engine crew finished the Tuesday afternoon at Caboolture in support of the Queensland Police, assisting with reconnaissance of the damage in that area.

## Summary

During the flood crisis there were reports on the news and through other Emergency Services that there were not enough helicopter resources to save lives. I also know of a commercial operator who was using his helicopter to hover low and take people off the roof of houses, due to the unavailability of winch equipped helicopters. It has been frustrating and deeply disturbing for our professional crews to hear these comments and know that we may have assisted and saved more lives.

Unfortunately the QCC issues during the flood crisis were not unexpected. There is evidence to support that the QCC tasking process in general, should be reviewed. For example a man was washed out of the Boyne River near Gladstone toward the end of the day. Our Bundaberg helicopter was phoned by the Queensland Police to assist with the search. Enroute to the search area, the QCC called off our helicopter and re-tasked it to conduct a non-urgent medical transfer. The man that had been washed out to sea was found dead the next day, washed up on the beach. His best chance of survival was to be found before last light. The QCC did not seem to comprehend the life saving possibilities of commencing a search immediately and prior to dark.

I hope that this submission will assist any investigation into the efficiency and effectiveness of the Emergency Services Helicopter network.

## Suggested Recommendations

1. A review of how Emergency Helicopters are tasked during normal operations, to ensure efficient and effective support to all of the Emergency Services.

2. A review of how and when to centralise the tasking of Emergency Services assets, in particular the major assets such as helicopters, during disaster or large crisis situations.