

Copter crash kills 3 paratroopers

Tragedy occurs when weather not a factor

Kiowa Warrior helicopter

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U.S. Army photo

By David Sheppard

El Paso Times

Three paratroopers were killed and another injured Sunday night in the crash of two Army reconnaissance helicopters that were taking part in a live missile exercise at McGregor Range.

The paratroopers, from the 82nd Airborne Division at Fort Bragg, N.C., were training with Hellfire anti-tank missiles when their OH-58D Kiowa Warrior helicopters went down at McGregor's missile impact area, about 15 miles southeast of Orogrande, N.M.

The injured soldier was treated and released after being airlifted by a Fort Bliss helicopter to Beaumont Army Medical Center. The paratroopers' names were being withheld pending notification of relatives.

"All we know is two helicopters slammed into the earth, and we don't know what caused it," Fort Bliss spokesman Capt. Thomas Collins said.

"You can say two helicopters ... hit the ground about the same time and (a collision) is an assumption. But I can't assume something I do not know for sure," Collins said.

Officers from the Army Safety Center in Fort Rucker, Ala., arrived Monday afternoon at Fort Bliss to investigate the crash.

The accident occurred at about 9:50 p.m. in clear weather over a flat, open area of the 950-square-mile desert range.

The pilots were flying with the aid of night-vision goggles, which is routine for night combat training with Kiowa helicopters, Fort Bragg spokesman Maj. Rivers Johnson said.

He said about three-fourths of all training in the 82nd Airborne is done at night. Army investigators aren't yet sure if the goggles contributed to the accident.

Officials said the \$5.5 million Kiowas, built by Bell Helicopter Textron in Fort Worth, were training Sunday night to shoot Hellfires at plastic tank targets set up on the range.

It was not known Monday if the two aircraft had already fired at targets, or if they were launching their missiles when they went down.

Army spokesmen also were not sure Monday if other aircraft were airborne at the time of the crash.

The crash started a small range fire that was put out Sunday night by Fort Bliss firefighters.

The training was part of a three-week combat exercise by the 1st Battalion of the division's 82nd Aviation Brigade. The unit arrived April 11 at McGregor Range with 300 troops, 23 Kiowas and three Blackhawk transport helicopters, Johnson said.

"Live gunnery is the reason we use the range," he said. "It's big, it's open, it's rugged and it provides us with realistic training."

The Army suspended the exercise Monday. Airborne target

Two Kiowa Warrior helicopters, shown firing a Hellfire laser-guided missile, crashed at McGregor Range Sunday, killing three.

A look at the OH-58D Kiowa Warrior helicopter, according to the Army's "Weapon Systems" manual:

- Crew: Two.
- Mission: Reconnaissance, security, command and control, defensive air combat.
- Armament: .50-caliber machine gun; air-to-air Stinger missiles; laser-guided Hellfire missiles; Hydra rockets.
- Maximum gross weight: 5,500 pounds.
- Top speed: 118 knots unarmed, 113

- knots armed.
- Prime contractor: Textron Inc. (Bell Helicopter) of Fort Worth.
- Production history: First fielded in 1984; 225 fielded as of September 1995; procurement objective of 383 aircraft by December 1997.
- Two OH-58D Kiowa Warrior helicopters crashed on McGregor Range late Sunday, killing three of the four people aboard the two aircraft. Officials still are investigating the cause.



Army copters crash in N.M.

By Robert Moore

El Paso Times

Two Army helicopters were reported down on southern New Mexico's McGregor Range late Sunday, but officials couldn't immediately report whether any of the four people aboard were hurt.

"We have two helicopters that went down sometime around 10 (p.m.)," Fort Bliss spokesman Tony Cuciniello said. "We have two MAST (air ambulance) helicopters on the scene, along with other emergency crews."

He said he hadn't received word of the extent of damage or possible injuries.

The downed helicopters were both OH-58 Kiowas, with two-person crews. Fort Bliss units have no Kiowas, so it appears the downed aircraft were from other posts. McGregor Range, which covers 950 square miles of desert around the White Sands-Orogrande, N.M., area, frequently is used for training from soldiers throughout the United States.

Cuciniello said he couldn't speculate on whether the two copters collided.

"We probably won't get anything specific until (this morning). Details are very sketchy," he said.

Cuciniello could only describe the location of the crash site as "a few miles east of Range 10" on McGregor.

The Army's official "Weapons Systems" manual, published earlier this year, describes the Kiowa as "the only practical armed reconnaissance aircraft in the Army inventory" through the end of the century.

Although it wasn't immediately clear Sunday what weapons systems the downed Kiowas were carrying, the aircraft can be equipped with air-to-air Stinger missiles; .50-caliber machine guns; Hellfire laser-guided missiles; and Hydra rockets.

The Army had 225 Kiowas fielded as of September 1995 in the United States, Europe and South Korea, the Army's "Weapons Systems" manual reported.

THE WARRIOR

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