

**In remembrance of the crew of Thunder Bear 621
RH-53D Helicopter crash in California**



RH-53D, Sea Stallion helicopter, BuNo 158691, photo by Trevor Bartlett

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On the bright cool morning of January 27th, 2018, three courageous hikers started the climb up Montara Mountain above Moss Beach California with high hopes of finding the crash site of RH-53D Sea Stallion helicopter, BuNo 158691, call sign "Thunder Bear 621", which crashed November 17th 1991. The helicopter had left Alameda Naval Air Station for San Diego on a routine flight, but disappeared for nearly a week before its wreckage was found. Three Naval Air Reserve crew members from the Mine Countermeasures Squadron 19 (HM-19) were killed in the crash. The exact location of the crash site was lost to history and the site was completely overgrown and forgotten. About ten years after the accident, some squadron members wanted to revisit the site and started looking for it again. A plaque had been placed at the crash site after the recovery crew had completed its work and some former members wanted to know what happened to it. We wanted to relocate the exact crash site, discover what still remained at the site and search for the plaque. Lastly we wanted to place a new memorial maker at the crash site in remembrance of the crew of Thunder Bear 621.



NW 621 approximately 2 months before the crash



Photo from the Santa Cruz Sentinel Newspaper Nov 25, 1991

Why the helicopter crashed is unknown. The RH-53D helicopter, BuNo158691, call sign Thunder Bear 621, left NAS Alameda at 9:30am November 17th, 1991 for NAS North Island in San Diego on a routine logistics flight to pick up equipment and passengers. The helicopter did not arrive at its destination and was declared missing. No distress radio calls were made and there were no signals that they were having any flight troubles. Navy, Air Force, Coast Guard and the Civil Air Patrol searched all along the California coast for it. The wreckage was reported by a civilian pilot landing at the Half Moon Bay Airport six days later on November 23rd. Civilian pilot John Randall was on a recreational flight in his two-seat single engine helicopter from Half Moon Bay when he spotted the hillside wreckage amid charred brush. He had been asked to keep an eye out for it by the Civil Air Patrol. The helicopter wreckage was badly burned and was very difficult to see among the brush along the steep mountainside.



Montara Mountain above Moss Beach California, crash site located near the top

It was a team effort to find this crash site and Mick Wedley, Jeff Christner and I contributed special skills to accomplish this mission. I was able to research and find an aerial photo of the crash site in a local newspaper that confirmed the location of the crash site. Jeff used his skills on Google Earth to come up with a derived coordinate. Mick was our guide up the trail to get us near the site. It was a long hard four mile plus hike with over 1000 feet in altitude gain to get near the derived coordinate location that Jeff had carefully plotted on Google Earth. During the hike we saw signs of recent coyote activity and Mick described reports of mountain lions in the area. It would have been impossible to access the location had it not been for PG & E who had recently cleared a side trail near the coordinate.



On the PG&E side trail near our derived coordinate



Thick brush blocked our path

Once we arrived near our derived location, we were faced with a massive obstacle of thick brush that blocked the last 150 feet. As we pondered our next move, I felt a sharp pain on my arm. It was a painful tick that was biting into my arm that had to be removed before proceeding. Mick led the way through the brush going downslope to our derived coordinate. I soon followed by widening the path.



Mick making a path just wide enough to move forward

After a few yards of progress going down slope, I took another look at the aerial photo and double checked my GPS before I realized that the crash site was most likely located further to the right. I decided to make my own way to the right as I pushed and forced my way forward. As I made my way, I peered down under the thick brush to the ground looking for wreckage. Sure enough I saw several pieces barely visible sticking up through the dirt. I clawed my way down to them and started to look around on my hands and knees. I soon uncovered one then another piece of wreckage. In no time at all, I uncovered six or seven pieces. I knew that this was the impact site location. I called out to the others who were still slowly making their way down the slope about 10 feet away, but I could not see them because the brush was so thick. Jeff had brought along a pin pointer metal detector. He started checking the area with it and discovered that there were "hits" all over.



Jeff and Mick working the site

Mick and Jeff concentrated searching at the place where I had found a few pieces, while I continued to explore the area. I checked further down slope and to the sides, but did not see any more pieces on the ground or the plaque. The crash site had been mostly cleaned up and all that remained were pieces no bigger than our hands. I was a little disappointed that they had cleaned up the crash site so well, but relieved that we had found the crash site. A small pile of artifacts was collected and brought up to our jumping off point. We spread them out and did some light cleaning on them trying to look for identifying numbers. Before heading back down, we photographed everything and recorded coordinates. One small piece of the helicopter was recovered for a memorial display to be created for the NAS Alameda Museum. Lastly, Jeff placed a memorial marker at the site in remembrance of the crew of Thunder Bear 621.



Pile of parts discovered at the crash site



Memorial Jeff left at the crash site, one flag for each crewmember lost

The Crew:



LCDR Joseph P. Drazek
Age: 38
Reported HM-19: May 1989
Total Flight Hours: 2650
Residence: Elizabeth, NJ
Native of: Coronado, CA
Years of service: 14

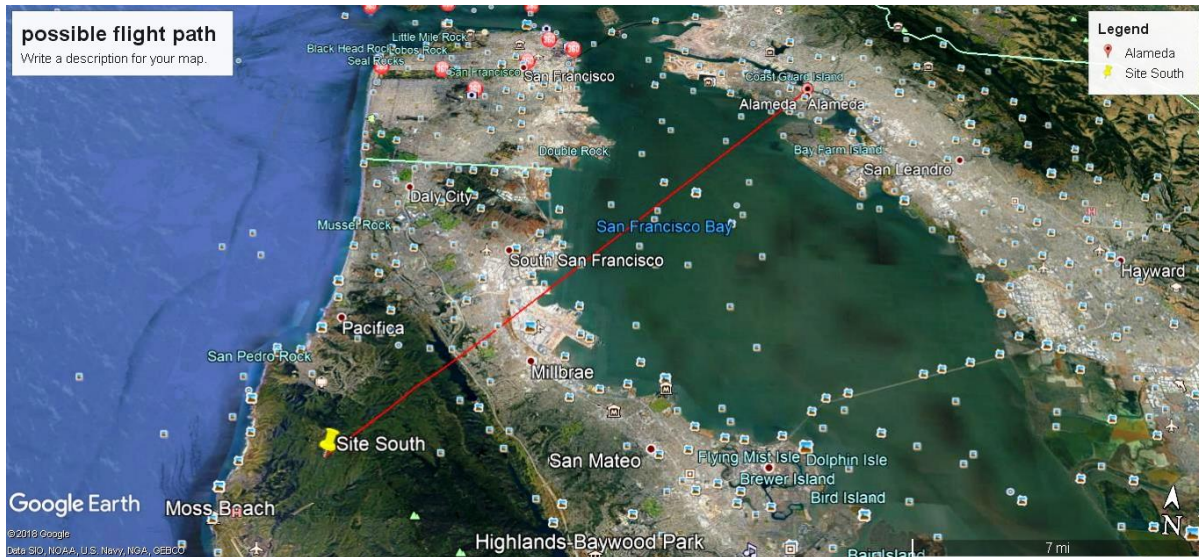


LT Christian G. Taylor
Age: 32
Reported HM-19: May 1991
Total Flight Hours: 2430
Residence: Malvern, PA
Native of: Malvern, PA
Years of service: 9



AME2 Kevin A. Johnson
Age: 25
Reported to HM-19: March 1990
Total Flight Hours: 310
Residence: Walnut Creek, CA
Native of: Concord, NH
Years of service: 5

Three crewmen aboard the helicopter were killed in the mishap. The squadron mourned the loss of the shipmates and they are still missed by their family, friends and squadron mates to this day. The deceased were Petty Officer AME2 Kevin Andrew Johnson, 25, of Walnut Creek; Lt. Cmdr. Joseph Peter Drazek II, 38, of Coronado, and Lt. Christian Gerard Taylor, 32, of Malvern, Penn. The pilot, Joseph Peter Drazek II, was a member of the Coast Guard for eight years and for the previous year had been a pilot for Continental Airlines. Christian Gerard Taylor was also an airline pilot. Both LCDR Drazek and Lt. Taylor were selected reservists. AME2 Kevin Andrew Johnson was an active duty reservist.



Google Earth image shows Alameda and location of crash site 20 miles SW

It was reported that the crash site was not along the normal flight pattern, which follows the coastline over the ocean. However, the crash site was not too far off course, just a few miles inland at a location where the coastline sticks out between Pacifica and Half Moon Bay. A Navy official said, "To be quite frank we have no idea at this time...why they were where they were." The crash site is located just over two miles to the coastline and about twenty miles to Alameda. It appears the helicopter was traveling southwest from Alameda heading for the coast and it just cleared the mountain ridgeline before it crashed. It also appears that the helicopter was headed straight to the Half Moon Bay Airport. The helicopter crashed at an altitude of about 1250 feet. There is a flight adversary that says to make every effort to avoid flying below 1,000 feet AGL along the coast in that area. Weather must have been a factor in the accident. There were clouds and intermittent rain showers during the scheduled flight time. Without the official accident report, I can't be sure of the flight path or causes of the mishap. A Freedom of Information Request has been submitted to the Navy in an effort to discover what the official Navy accident report said happened to the helicopter. This story will be updated when new information is received. One squadron member said, "The men who had to go there and recover our aircraft and friends wanted answers, but speaking for myself, I wanted my friend back."



Delivery of the 1st RH-53D to HM-19, circa 1989

Helicopter Mine Countermeasures Squadron 19 (HM-19) "Golden Bears" was established at NAS Alameda, California on 9 January 1989 as the Naval Reserve's second Airborne Mine Countermeasures (AMCM) squadron, flying the RH-53D Sea Stallion Helicopter operating under the control of Commander, Helicopter Wing Reserve. HM-19 was comprised of about 325 officers and enlisted men. HM-19 was the recipient of the Chief of Naval Operations Aviation Safety Award for calendar years 1989, 1990 and 1993 as well as the 1989 Commander, Helicopter Wing Reserve Retention Excellence Award. In January 1993, the Golden Bears transited to the MH-53E Sea Dragon Helicopter. HM-19 was disestablished November 5th 1994 and integrated with HM-15.



Sikorsky RH-53D Sea Stallion helicopter at NAS Alameda, photo by Trevor Bartlett

The Sikorsky RH-53D Sea Stallion helicopter was used primarily for Airborne Mine Countermeasures (AMCM), with a secondary mission of shipboard delivery. The RH-53D helicopters were fitted with devices for the detection, sweeping and neutralization of all types of mines. The Sikorsky H-53 Sea Stallion model is the military's most crash-prone helicopter. There are 138 occurrences in the incomplete ASN safety database between Jun 1967 and Dec 2017 for all of the H-53 A thru E models. At least 30 of them were H-53D model crashes. The RH-53D had an accident rate of 10.04 crashes for every 100,000 flight hours. Due to the aircraft's large size and troop capacity, accidents involving H-53 helicopters have been some of the deadliest helicopter accidents. More than 200 servicemen have been killed in accidents involving the CH-53A, CH-53D, and CH-53E model helicopters between 1969 and 1990. The latest Navy model is the H-53E Sea Dragon and they have crashed at a rate three times greater than other Navy helicopters — a crash rate that has nearly doubled in recent years. Navy officials have said repeatedly that they're confident in the helicopter's safety. And so the Navy's oldest and most unreliable helicopter flies on, with no plans to take it out of service until at least 2025.

This investigation was one of the most painful in recent memory for me because of lasting effects from the hike. In my excitement of discovering the crash site, I was careless as I pushed my way through the thick brush. Those bushes were poison oak! The pain and itching from exposure to the poison oak lasted weeks. It was only later that I read that nasty poison oak also took down quite a few of the crash recovery crew. The tick bite lasted only minutes, but soreness at the spot also lasted days. I continue to monitor the area for Lyme disease. My pain and discomfort lasted weeks, but I'm glad that I was able to bring some measure of closure to the families and friends of those lost. I'm sure my pain pales in comparison to the lasting pain of losing a friend or family member. The three lost crewmen were in the Navy during the same time I served. I consider them shipmates who deserve to be remembered. My hope is that this story renews their memory and their service to their country. May they rest in peace because they are not forgotten.



Sikorsky RH-53D from HM-14 in flight circa 1987

Fair Winds and Following Seas...