

Docket No. SA-530

Exhibit No. 9-L

NATIONAL TRANSPORTATION SAFETY BOARD

Washington, D.C.

Lewis Email Regarding HEMS VFR Operations

(1 Pages)

Ward Lorenda

From: Steve Lewis [s [REDACTED] .com]
Sent: Friday, January 16, 2009 1:59 PM
To: HEMS
Subject: HEMS Safety

From: Steven R. Lewis
Air Methods Inc.
Base Safety Manager/Line Pilot
Bakersfield, CA

I would like to take this opportunity to express my concerns about HEMS operations. First, a little history on myself. I am a retired Army CW4 with 17 years of military flying. After retiring in 1999, I began my civilian career flying EMS, where I'm still currently employed. During 27 years of helicopter flying, I have seen or encountered just about every dangerous scenario that can present itself to a Pilot. There has to be a change to the way we do business or we will continue to have accidents and I do know that is your objective in your upcoming conference in February. I was recently asked by my Regional Aviation Director to provide feedback to him as to what I thought would make our industry safer; the following was my reply:

Many EMS flights are requested with destinations without any weather reports or forecasts. This is much more hazardous at night and in mountainous terrain. This creates the "go and take a look" flight, not a good scenario and will eventually be the cause of future fatal mishaps. What is the answer or resolve? We could mandate that if no enroute/destination weather is available or area forecast, that we cannot accept the request. However, I don't think the customer is going to be happy with that decision. What can we do? Implement more stringent weather minimums is my answer. Example: If your flight is at night into mountainous terrain with no weather report, then your take-off weather must be 2000 feet higher than the highest obstacle in your flight path.

I have seen the projected VFR weather minimums table and I'm concerned about it. I find it hard to believe that we are allowed to fly aided night flight in our "local area," "non-mountainous" with an 800' ceiling. If you are going to keep any cloud clearance lets say 200 feet, that would put you at an altitude of 600 feet. I refer you to the recent fatal accident where the helicopter was at 700 - 800 feet and struck guide lines of a tower. In my opinion, the lowest ceiling aided or unaided, should be 1500 feet. Just in my local area, there are numerous towers that are over 400 feet high. If the weather deteriorates rather quickly the 800' local or 1000' x-country does not leave ample enough time to make a quality decision before the aircraft and crew are placed in peril.

Here in the San Joaquin Valley, we have a horrendous problem with fog. It can form in a matter of minutes and is impossible to predict it's change. In my 10 years experience here, I can accurately say that if it's reported 3 miles visibility in our Class D Airspace, it will less than that outside of it somewhere. Under our current GOM, we must have 5 miles visibility to fly x-country or in mountainous terrain. I see in the projected weather minimum table that will change to 3 miles for x-country non-mountainous. I recommend that 5 miles visibility be maintained as a minimum for the same reasons that I stated in the previous paragraph.

As a last comment, our base has been utilizing NVGs for almost a year. We have three pilots that have never flown with NVGs until becoming qualified last year. I flew NVGs during my military career. It is remarkable to see how the comfort level from them and the medical crews has been elevated. NVG's are not the entire answer to making us safer, but they need to be made available to all HEMS operations

Sincerely,
Steven R. Lewis