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Local responders to Aniak plane crash praised; victims recovering

(Anchorage, AK) – Three of the four Division of Forestry employees injured in a plane crash in the Western Alaska village of Aniak on Thursday are recovering in Anchorage hospitals today while the fourth has been treated and released.

The three individuals still hospitalized suffered serious but non-life-threatening injuries and are in stable condition.

The pilot was identified as Mark Jordan, of Eagle River. The three emergency firefighters on board were identified as Albert Simon, of Hooper Bay; Craig Friday, of Hooper Bay; and Kelly Kehlenbach, of Aniak. The plane was en route from Aniak to McGrath, where the firefighters were to be outfitted for an assignment to support initial attack responses at the Kenai/Kodiak Area forestry station in Soldotna.

The National Transportation Safety Board is investigating the crash, which occurred shortly after the plane took off from the Aniak airport at approximately 4 p.m. The plane, a state-owned Aero Commander 500 Shrike, crashed into a pond in a gravel pit about one mile downstream from the airport.

Local Aniak residents played an integral role in the rescue effort before Alaska State Troopers and local emergency medical service responders arrived at the crash site. Several local residents went into the water to help retrieve the injured individuals from the plane after it crashed.

Thirteen-year-old Dylan Nicholson and four of his friends – Trevor Morgan, 17; Mason Dallmann, 17; A.J. Simeon, 19; and Skye Morgan, 18, all of Aniak – were the first ones at the crash scene. They had driven by the gravel pit earlier and were on their way back to town when they looked back and noticed the plane in the water, though they hadn't seen or heard the crash. They were confused, he said, because the plane hadn't been there when they first passed the pond.

"Then we saw two guys come out of the plane," Nicholson said.

Nicholson used his cell phone to call his aunt, Lenora Nicholson, who works as a dispatcher for Alaska State Troopers in Aniak, to report the crash.

"I told her to bring medic trucks and stuff," he said.

The two people who climbed out of the plane were Friday and Kehlenbach. The children helped them out of the water, which was about 4-5 feet deep, and into Morgan's truck to transport them to the local clinic. Dallmann, meanwhile, waded out to the plane and remained with Jordan and Simon until more help arrived. He was in the frigid water for approximately 30 minutes.

"His legs were pretty numb for quite a while afterwards," said Dallmann's mother, Julia.

Ricky Ciletti, who works for the Alaska Department of Transportation and Public Facilities in Aniak, arrived on scene after Friday and Kehlenbach had been loaded into Morgan's truck and were being transported to the clinic.

By that time, workers from the Yukon-Kuskokwim Health Corporation's Aniak clinic had arrived and were working to extract Simon and Jordan from the plane.

"They called for backboards, so I borrowed a four-wheeler and went to pick up a couple of backboards," Ciletti said.

Troopers had also arrived on scene by that time and used a boat to transport both Jordan and Simon to shore. Jordan was loaded into an ambulance while Ciletti transported Simon to the clinic in the back of his DOT&PF truck.

Ciletti praised the response of the children who helped with the rescue, both in transporting Friday and Kellenbach to the clinic and for remaining with the other two injured forestry employees until help arrived.

"They jumped right into action and did some pretty heroic stuff to help those guys out," Ciletti said. "They were in four or five feet of water ... to have their heads together like that is pretty impressive."

The situation could have been much worse, he said.

"They could have been in deeper water; it dropped off quite a bit back by the tail of the plane," he said. "Somebody was watching over those boys."

Likewise, Nicholson's mother, Mary Turner, was proud of the way her son and his friends responded to what was a frightening situation.

"It makes me really proud that Dylan was able to focus and help people that needed help," said Turner, who as a teenager was a member of the Aniak Volunteer Fire Department's Dragon Slayers, a group of teenagers who assisted the fire department on EMS and fire calls.

Aniak City Councilman David Mattson, who arrived at the crash scene when the rescue was in progress, also characterized the children and others who assisted in the rescue as "heroes" He said the city will be honoring those who helped in some way.

State Forestry Director Chris Maisch today praised the efforts and courage of those involved in the rescue effort.

“The Division of Forestry would like to express our deepest gratitude to all the local first responders and Good Samaritan civilians and state workers that responded to this incident,” Maisch said. “I want to especially thank the young men and woman that played a key role in quickly requesting additional assistance and their personal efforts to help our employees injured in the incident. I’m certain their actions were key to the outcome and I can only imagine that their presence in the water and on shore brought great comfort to Mark and Albert as they were waiting for additional help.”

The Division of Forestry is today sending to a recovery team which includes divers to retrieve the plane from the water. The plane will be moved to the Aniak airport and then transported to Anchorage in a C-130 cargo plane.

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