MAX-DEPTH DIVE

Shortly after midday on 30 March, a distress call from a twin-engine Beechcraft Baron with two people on board, suddenly changed the complexion of an otherwise fine Saturday afternoon.

The call would precipitate a large-scale multi-agency search and recovery involving aircraft, vessels and divers.

The plane, with owner Eric Hertz and his wife Kathy on board, was heading from Auckland's Ardmore airport to Mt Cook in the South Island, via Timaru, when it got into difficulty.

A search coordinated by the Rescue Coordination Centre (RCCNZ) concentrated on an area where a passing Mt Cook airlines aircraft reported seeing an oil slick, about 1 nautical mile off Gannet Island, off the entrance to Kawhia Harbour.

An Auckland-based rescue helicopter soon arrived on the scene and located the oil slick as well as two doors bearing the aircraft's tail number. A Coastguard vessel guided to the scene dropped a marker buoy while two helicopters and a fixed-wing aircraft searched the wider area until last light.

With the onset of darkness the search was called off, RCCNZ confident that if survivors had been on the surface, they would have been found.

The operation now transitioned to a police-led recovery operation, with Waikato Police Search and Rescue Sergeant Warren Shaw coordinating a team from a variety of government agencies and private organisations.

"We based our search out of the west coast town of Raglan where Coastguard vessel Gallagher Rescue is based," he said.

"This vessel was to prove a vital cog in our wheel as it was used frequently to ferry personnel to the site over the treacherous Raglan Bar and later to the navy dive-support vessel which was called in to assist."

Sergeant Shaw said the first priority was to actually find the aircraft wreckage.

"Obviously that was beyond the capabilities of police, so we sought help from the New Zealand Defence Force and the Navy in particular," Sergeant Shaw said.

"The following day members of their Mine Countermeasures Team arrived on site.

"Before long they were able to accurately pinpoint the wreckage thanks to a device known as a Remus 100, an autonomous underwater vehicle."

Warrant Officer James Harper, officer in charge of the Navy's Mine Countermeasures team, said the torpedo-like Remus 100 was capable of gauging ocean depths to 100m.

"More importantly for this operation, it has side-scan sonar fitted on it and we can get imagery of the ocean floor and everything on it.

"Though this is the first time we've searched for a downed plane, we've previously used the device to recover a microlight that crashed into the ocean and, in 2009 the Remus 100 was used to find the wreckage of the Princess Ashika after it sank off the Tongan coast."

Remus 100 mapped a 900 square metre section of the ocean floor for the recovery team, which by now had been expanded to also include Coastguard, Civil Aviation Authority accident investigators, as well as meteorological and ocean-current experts.

"While the sub-surface search was going on, more traditional searches were also taking place, with police observers placed aboard a rescue helicopter to search the rugged, inaccessible coastline between Raglan and Kawhia.

"Though nothing significant was found, this search was necessary to ensure nothing was missed and to assure the family and public that everything that could be done was being done," Sergeant Shaw said.

It wasn't long, however, before Warrant Officer Harper's team presented their scan results, which showed the team was right on the button in terms of locating the submerged aircraft.

"James presented a sonar image of an object that appeared to be the aircraft we were seeking. From there a request went out to Joint Forces New Zealand and, before long, HMNZS Manawanui was making steam on a two-day sail from Devonport to the crash scene.

"At the same time, the Navy's Operational Dive Team (ODT) was requested and arrived on site with a variety of specialist equipment."

Dive team boss Lieutenant Commander Trevor Leslie said the wreckage's location meant the aircraft's recovery and, crucially, that of the two occupants, was right at the cusp of the ODT's capability.

"There were some strong bottom currents there, underwater visibility wasn't too good and that, combined with the depth, combined with the nature of the wreckage and entanglement hazards, meant there were definitely some challenges."

Just how challenging became apparent on the second day's diving when a diver was injured on the ocean floor with a precautionary evacuation to Auckland Hospital required.

Despite those challenges, by the sixth day of the recovery operation things were progressing well, with one body recovered.

On the seventh day, divers fixed strops to the aircraft in preparation for bringing it to the surface.

Later that afternoon the news the country had been waiting for came through – the aircraft had been recovered aboard HMNZS Manawanui with the second body found inside.

"There were some challenges due to the sea swell, but the dive team got there in the end," Lieutenant Commander Leslie said.

Reflecting on the operation overall, Sergeant Shaw said the recovery of the aircraft and both occupants was a significant success for all the agencies involved, albeit one tinged with sadness for the loss of two people. and all the agencies involved expressed their sympathies to the families.

"But this effort shows that the multi-agency approach to such events ensures we can get the right people in the right place at the right time to manage such incidents."

WORDS ANDREW MCALLEY, NZ POLICE - PICS NEW ZEALAND POLICE, ROYAL NEW ZEALAND NAVY AND CIVIL AVIATION AUTHORITY

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