

HELICOPTER RESCUE: THE CHALLENGES FACING BC TODAY

By Ian McNeill

Photo: Courtesy of Selkirk Mountain Helicopters



Helicopter rescue for a forest worker injured on a remote hillside is by no means a sure thing these days. What does that mean for falling contractors in BC?

If you work at a loading dock in Surrey or a sawmill in Prince George and suffer a serious injury it will take about 10 minutes for the BC Ambulance Service to have you in the wagon and on the way to hospital. In less than half an hour you will be receiving expert care from highly trained medical personnel in a state-of-the-art hospital. On the other hand, if you suffer a serious injury while working in a remote corner of the Haida Gwaii your experience is likely to be somewhat different. It certainly was for Esko Saarinen. After getting his foot crushed by a falling Sitka spruce in March 2013, Saarinen endured an 11-hour odyssey before arriving at St. Paul's hospital in Vancouver. It would have taken considerably less time, and Saarinen's suffering would have been lessened significantly, if a helicopter had been available to transport him from the injury site to the nearest hospital in Queen Charlotte City. However, despite the promise of a helicopter from the emergency dispatch personnel to his boss, Timo Jonsson, who was communicating with them, one never arrived.

Stories like Saarinen's are all too com-

mon in BC. Alphonsus Domalain can tell you about the time he got hit by a whipping tree limb that came at him "like a helicopter blade" when he was falling near Winter Harbour. His injuries

included four broken ribs and internal bleeding. Thanks to the efforts of his employer, W.D. Moore Logging, and the licensee they were working for, Western Forest Products, a helicopter from 442 Squadron in Comox eventually came and airlifted him to Victoria. But the ordeal took more than four hours and was not without hiccups. Graham Lasure of W.D. Moore says WFP tends to look after its own and within minutes of the injury calls were going out to private helicopter companies in the hopes of securing an evacuation. However, two companies contacted couldn't supply any kind of machine and another said it could, but not until noon. This was at 9:45 in the

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morning. Eventually 442 agreed to send the big Cormorant, but it was an act of mercy because 442's official role is search and rescue, not emergency evacuation of injured forestry workers.

And then there's the story of Revelstoke's Travis Schiller who took a fall taking a gantry off a 330, sustaining serious head injuries when he hit the ground. A call to 911 was rewarded with a promise to send a helicopter "but then it got dispatched to a worse situation," says his brother Blair Schiller, who then decided to manage the situation on his own by ordering a chopper from Selkirk Helicopters. Fortunately one was available and after picking up a pair of search and rescue volunteers from a local ski hill it made its way to the injury site. "We've learned over the years that calling 911 is a bust," says Schiller.

And the problem of getting timely

and appropriate transportation and access to health care isn't just restricted to forestry workers working on remote sidehills, says Graham Lasure. People in remote regions and small communities throughout BC are suffering from service cutbacks to ambulance services and a general failure to provide the kind of medical care people living in Metro Vancouver take for granted. In towns like Winter Harbour, he says, it can take

worth noting that extracting injured workers from remote locations is problematic at the best of the times. We live in a vast province broken up by a series of mountain chains and subject to weather conditions that frequently make the operation of low-flying aircraft impossible. Despite the challenges, Gord Kirk, Director of Dispatch Operations for the BC Ambulance Service, says the BCAS takes its mandate to provide air evacu-

ing heli-skiers up mountains in winter. What's more, few helicopters—public or private—are equipped with the kind of longline rescue equipment necessary to extract injured workers from perilous locations. And finally, ambulance personnel are not search-and-rescue trained; they will not and cannot leave the roadside and venture off into the bush.

Further complicating matters is the fact that there is no legal requirement for the government to provide emergency air evacuation for personnel working in remote locations. According to Bjarne Nielsen, a senior regional officer at WorkSafeBC, "if an employer feels it is not necessary to have a helicopter as a primary means of getting into or out of a work site then they need to have an appropriate emergency transport vehicle available to take a worker to the nearest hospital." In other words, if you go out into the woods today the responsibility for getting you out if you get injured rests with you or your employer. All of which explains why companies like

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an hour to get a ground ambulance let alone helicopter evacuation. "We have this huge tax base in remote areas and we pay the same for health care but we could die or be permanently injured because we can't get access to it," he says.

Now before piling on Emergency Management BC in general and the BC Ambulance Service in particular, it's

ation services throughout the province seriously with its fleet of fixed-wing and four dedicated air ambulance helicopters that is supplemented by contracting out arrangements with 40 pre-qualified charter carriers. But as the Domalain incident illustrates, helicopters of any kind aren't always available; they could be fighting forest fires in summer or haul-



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Western Forest Products keep the contact numbers of local helicopter companies in their Rolodex. Which is fine for those who can afford it, but what about the little guys, the small crews working in remote locations who simply can't afford to call in a helicopter at the drop of a tree, because somebody has to pay the freight and it is not a government responsibility to do so?

It's a situation licensees empathise with says John Bulcock, Director of Corporate Health and Safety at Western Forest Products and co-chair of SAFER, the forest-industry sponsored Safety Advisory Foundation for Education and Research. "If the government can't afford it, how does a small contractor?" he says. "How do you rationalize the dollars in a life and death situation? A seriously injured worker can cost millions of dollars over the course of a lifetime. That would pay for helicopter services for a year."

His solution to the problem is four-fold. First, and this can't be stressed enough he says, there is an ongoing need to develop and maintain a safety cul-

ture that prevents serious injuries from occurring in the first place. Secondly, personnel working in forestry, especially first aid attendants, need to learn how to communicate effectively with emergency services when injuries oc-

responded in the past to these kinds of situations, and the crews are invariably willing to come and are heroic in the performance of their duties when ordered to do so, their mandate does not officially include this function. And finally, the in-

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cur. They need to understand the kinds of questions dispatch personnel are going to need answered before they can assign appropriate transportation. "As an industry we have not communicated effectively with ambulance services," says WFP Senior VP John Mann. "We recognize that at Western Forest Products and we are working on improving those communications." Thirdly, Bulcock and Mann would like to see the mandate of the RCAF's 442 Squadron in Comox expanded to include emergency extraction of injured workers. Although it has

dustry would benefit from having a dedicated helicopter equipped with longline rescue equipment based somewhere it can effectively serve the widest theater of operations. Bulcock suggests central Vancouver Island, which would also allow access to the central coast.

"People injured in BC are citizens of BC and have the inherent right to receive the same level of care as everyone else," says Bulcock, adding that the biggest stumbling block on the way to providing that care is an understanding of the problem. "Nobody can be characterized

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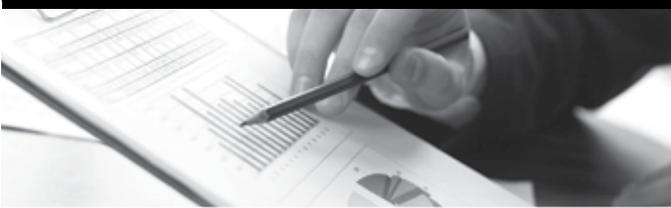

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as not wanting to make a difference. I can't think of anyone, politicians included, who doesn't believe a boy dying on a hillside does not need and deserve help, but we need to move the conversation forward and find some solutions."

Currently, the Coast Harvesting Advisory Group (CHAG) which is made up of forest industry companies and organizations and supported by BC Forest Safety Council, is working with BC Ambulance Service, rural physicians and federal search and rescue personnel to address injured worker evacuation. (More information is available about CHAG and this work in the Safety Report on page 16.)

In the meantime, forestry personnel working in remote locations would do well to heed the advice of Gord Kirk of the BCAS and have a plan. Make sure you have the right equipment to communicate wherever you are—cellphone service is notoriously patchy in remote areas—and "be aware that satellite phones will not dial 911." Once communication is established, personnel at the injury site need to be able to communi-

cate effectively with dispatch personnel about the nature and extent of injuries and also be able to pinpoint exactly where the injured person is located. He adds that it's a myth that you need a doctor on site to approve emergency air evacuation. "Completely false," he says. As for the time factor, it's rarely going to happen at the drop of a hard hat. If emergency search and rescue personnel or longline extraction methods are called for, it's going to take time to organize and deploy the required assets. If private helicopter companies are involved, somebody is eventually going to get a bill. At least that's the way it is today. Hopefully through negotiations and discussions between government and industry something can be done to make it less of an ordeal for workers in isolated locations and the citizens of small communities to get the kind of medical attention they need and deserve in a timely manner.▲

Proof That Helicopter Cost Savings Are A False Economy

Proof that not providing emergency helicopter services to workers in remote locations amounts to false economy is provided by a paper written by University of Northern BC business administration student Roberta Squires in 2014. In it she states that: "Injuries to workers in BC result in the loss of more economically productive years than heart disease and cancer combined and cost nearly \$2.8 billion per year. Nearly three quarters of people who die of trauma-related conditions in Northern BC do so before they can be brought to a hospital; 82 per cent in Northwestern BC, compared to 12 per cent in Metro Vancouver."

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