

S. C. M. P.

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# Air crews 'could have joined Osprey search'

The Royal Auxiliary Air Force would probably have been able to go out on the day the Osprey sank to look for survivors if they had been told about distress signals by the Marine Department.

The Chief Staff Officer of the RAAF, Squadron Leader J. Shawcross said this yesterday at the reconvened Marine Court of Inquiry into the sinking of the barquentine Osprey during Typhoon Ellen on September 9, 1983.

The inquiry has been told that at least four people were alive in the water at that time — only one of them survived. Eight people died during the tragedy.

An earlier report by the court has criticised several Marine Department officers for contributing to their deaths by the failure to respond to distress signals.

Sqdn Ldr Shawcross said they had offered assistance to the Marine Department at 4.30 pm that afternoon but it was refused. They were not told about distress signals reported.

He has been recalled to give evidence on whether search and rescue would have been possible in the location of the Osprey's wreck which has been found some 28 miles away from where the court originally believed it to be.

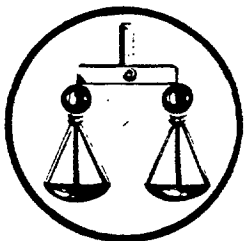
He said this area is in Chinese waters, but in Hongkong air space.

Military planes are not allowed to fly over the area, but the auxiliaries can.

On September 9, a helicopter went up at 5.25 pm for a post-typhoon reconnaissance but a later flight had to be cancelled because of bad weather.

Sqdn Ldr Shawcross said had there been an emergency, a helicopter could have flown from 1 pm.

## In the courts



with Lindy Course  
Cathy Yeung  
Corrina Tai

"Had a distress signal been reported from the new area, I think a helicopter would have probably become airborne before dark and gone towards the area to make an attempt to locate it (the distress beacon)."

He added they could only speculate on whether it would have been successful because of the weather, which was still very bad.

He said the helicopter would have headed for south Lantau or Cheung Chau, but whether the pilot would have gone another 25 miles further out would have been up to him.

His decision would have been based on the quality and reliability of the information about the distress signals.

If the helicopter was receiving the signals, there would be more pressure on him to proceed even in poor conditions.

If the original signal was positive and linked to a missing vessel with the possibility of survivors in the water, that too would have encouraged the pilot to press on.

He said it would have

taken about 30 to 40 minutes to reach the wreck site, some 10-15 minutes to pick up the distress beacon and they would have had about an hour's fuel left to search the area for survivors.

The helicopter could probably have picked up four people by winch, but in an emergency people could have been landed on a Chinese island and the helicopter could have gone back for more still in the sea.

He will continue his evidence today.

The survivor, the bosun Mr Hiroaki Ogura, who was picked up from the sea after 50 hours, was due to return from Japan last night and is due in court today.

Part of his evidence is now in doubt because of new findings.

He had originally said the Osprey left Repulse Bay at 1 am, but witnesses have said they saw it still there about 3.30 am. From the location of the wreck, it is also believed that the speed and direction the vessel took on leaving Repulse Bay is different to what Mr Ogura originally said.

It has also been suggested by counsel for the marine officers criticised that his evidence on other survivors may also be unreliable.

Earlier the deputy Crown solicitor, Mr Frank Stock QC, for the Director of Marine, said the picture that arose from Mr Ogura's statements was "confusing" because there were different versions.

He said he was not trying to show Mr Ogura was lying, just to illustrate the understandable confusion in Mr Ogura's mind.

Witness Mr David Davies told the court how he found a rubber dinghy from the Osprey on September 13.

The Attorney-General said

on Monday he regarded this evidence, which was available at the first hearing but not brought in, as "insignificant."

Mr Davies said he had chartered the Osprey and visited it subsequently and made friends with the crew.

When he read on September 12 that the vessel was missing he rang the Marine Department and offered assistance, which was refused.

But the next day, he chartered a dual-registered boat and sailed out to a location given by the Marine Department, some 55 miles south of the Peak and at about 10.15 am found the dinghy on Aizhou Island, south of the Sokos.

Cross-examined by Mrs Gwen Fortner, mother of one of the crew members who died, he said he had gone with the agent, Mr C.K. Pak and a Japanese woman, to her house on September 14.

He said he thought the woman represented the owners.

He said Mr Pak had his own views on where the ship had been blown and also that he wanted to do his own search with Chinese tug boats.

A Post Office telecommunications expert, Mr Chan Kwok-chuen, said the Osprey's distress beacon should have given out a continuous signal, but reception could have been interrupted by a large object. Other interruptions however, such as big waves, should only have lasted a few seconds.

Only intermittent reports were made of the signals.

Judge Wane has said he will restrict the new hearing to the events on September 9 and 10 because the new evidence did not affect events after that.

The court also comprises Dr Peter Cheng and Capt A.J. Wagg.