



**Australian Government**  
**Australian Transport Safety Bureau**

**ATSB TRANSPORT SAFETY REPORT**  
Aviation Occurrence Investigation – AO-2012-133  
Preliminary

**Collision with terrain**  
**Robinson R22 Beta, VH-LLF**  
**130 km west of Halls Creek, WA**  
**3 October 2012**

## Collision with terrain – VH-LLF, Robinson R22 Beta - 130 km west of Halls Creek, Western Australia – 3 October 2012

On 3 October 2012, the pilots of two Robinson R22 Beta helicopters were engaged in aerial stock mustering on ‘Louisa Downs’, a cattle station about 140 km south-west of Halls Creek, Western Australia. At about 1430 Western Standard Time<sup>1</sup>, the pilots had completed a successful muster and landed at the homestead. The weather was fine with light to no wind.

In the daylight remaining, it was decided to take two station personnel for a flight over the station property. With a passenger on board each helicopter, the pilots overflew the yarded cattle and other parts of the property. At about 1630, the pilots landed on a section of river bed in the Margaret River for some fishing. After about 30 minutes on the ground, it was decided to return to Louisa Downs. Once airborne, the pilots arranged to visit a gorge about 2 minutes flying time away from the fishing spot (the gorge was on the Gliddon River, not far from where it ran into the Margaret River). On arrival at the gorge, the pilots surveyed the area from the air before landing on a pebble-covered sand bar in a relatively open part of the gorge (Figure 1).

**Figure 1: Aerial view along the gorge**



<sup>1</sup> Western Standard Time (WST) was Coordinated Universal Time (UTC) + 8 hours.

One of the pilots and a passenger swam further into the narrower and obscured part of the gorge (Figure 2), leaving the other pilot and passenger with the helicopters. At some point the pilot who remained at the helicopters indicated that he wanted to explore the gorge further, and departed alone in the helicopter, registered VH-LLF (LLF).

**Figure 2: Overhead view of the inner gorge**



The pilot and passenger swimming in the inner gorge heard a helicopter start up and, unaware of the pilot's intentions, thought it was a prompt to return to the helicopters. The swimmers were still in the inner gorge when the pilot of LLF descended into the same area and hovered above the water. The pilot was observed to manage a steady hover and did not show any signs of discomfort. The swimmers exited the inner gorge area and were part-way across the pool, when they turned around to see LLF ascending. The helicopter appeared to be operating normally with no indication of any technical problem. In view of the two swimmers and the passenger located on the sand bar, the tail of the helicopter collided with an overhanging rock formation and a section of the tail boom separated from the fuselage. The helicopter rolled to the left and descended out of view.

One of the witnesses recalled hearing two bangs, the second louder than the first, moments after the helicopter had fallen out of view. The swimmers returned to the inner gorge to find the helicopter submerged on its right side with substantial damage. The pilot was trapped in the wreckage and, despite a number of attempts, could not be extricated. The swimmers

returned to the second helicopter and the waiting passenger. The pilot of this helicopter ferried the passengers, in turn, out of the gorge to the previous Margaret River landing site. The pilot then departed for nearby 'Larrawa' station with one passenger, with the intention to return for the remaining passenger. It was too dark to return, however, and the passenger remained at the Margaret River site until the next morning. The pilot notified the operator and local police of the fatal accident.

The Australian Transport Safety Bureau initiated an investigation and attended the accident site, but was unable to closely examine the submerged wreckage. From the surface it was evident that the cabin roof was crushed in, both main rotor blades had severed a short distance from the main rotor hub, and one of the fuel tanks had detached from the aircraft structure.

It was reported there were no serviceability issues with the helicopter in the days preceding the accident. The helicopter had a current maintenance release issued under the charter operational category. The pilot held a Commercial Pilot (Helicopter) License with a total aeronautical experience of 1,034 hours and an aerial stock mustering approval. The pilot's last aviation medical was conducted in April 2012.

The investigation is continuing and will include analysis of the available information to identify safety factors and draft the final report.

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*The information contained in this web update is released in accordance with section 25 of the Transport Safety Investigation Act 2003 and is derived from the initial investigation of the occurrence. Readers are cautioned that new evidence will become available as the investigation progresses that will enhance the ATSB's understanding of the accident as outlined in this web update. As such, no analysis or findings are included in this update.*