



THE GOVERNMENT OF NORFOLK ISLAND

MEDIA RELEASE

"Near textbook" Norfolk Island emergency action saves six passengers after aircraft ditching

Chief Minister Andre Nobbs said today that Norfolk Island has once again displayed its level of technical expertise and capacity to deal with trying issues alone in the Pacific. This follows the successful rescue of six passengers from a medical evacuation aircraft which ditched in the ocean near Norfolk Island on Wednesday 18 November.

Norfolk Island is a self-governing territory under the authority of Australia, located in the South Pacific just over two hours by air from Brisbane, Sydney, Melbourne and Newcastle.

Late Wednesday night after several aborted landing attempts a Pel-Air Medivac aircraft operating for NRMA Careflight was successfully ditched off the western coast of Norfolk Island by Captain Dominic James. The captain and passengers were able to exit the sinking aircraft safely and using three lifejackets were able to maintain floatation for the medivac patient, passengers and crew. Although no mayday or panpan call had been received by the Norfolk Island airport, duty airport manager Larry Quintal had already commenced emergency procedures and within minutes the emergency control centre was manned, emergency rescue personnel were dispatched, aviation fire and rescue crews were briefed along with VAR crew, police, Emergency Services Minister Neville Christian, airport staff and marine craft operators.

The Chief Minister said that what followed was a near textbook process of emergency services and rescue coordination. Communications links were engaged and coordinates were sought from Australian and New Zealand emergency services authorities for satellite confirmation of the Emergency Position Indicating Radio Beacon (EPIRB) location to ensure that marine rescue vessels were dispatched to the appropriate rescue zone. Unfortunately due to the rapid submerging of the ditched aircraft the EPIRB had been unable to lock onto two satellites before ceasing transmission, therefore no triangulation was available and Norfolk Island rescue authorities had to commence search operations without this critical information.

Valuable local aviation experience was used to map out probable circuit paths taken by the aircraft and this information was passed through the communication network

to commence a coordinated coverage of the areas most likely to contain the ditched aircraft. During this process, emergency lighting towers were erected at the Kingston pier lighting up the entire landing area and surrounding heritage buildings, while two rescue boats had been launched, equipped with safety and rescue personnel and equipment. Various vantage points around the island were used to check for any indication of wreckage and survivors and contact was made with residents living on the western coast to gather last known positioning information.

In amongst these operations a volunteer observer who was scouting the coast across the Headstone area reported seeing faint light within the most likely circuit path area. *Advance II* captained by Darren Bates was already on his way to the area and within minutes had located and rescued the plane's crew, passengers and patient. Another local craft operated by Sputt Douran provided support.

The rescue was reported through the emergency network and the pier landing area was immediately configured to handle arriving casualties, two staffed and equipped ambulances aligned themselves with the overhead crane and two of the Island's doctors assembled with emergency staff and coordinators under halogen lighting towers, awaiting the rescue boat's arrival. With the array of lighting covering the landing area and the sea entrance, it was obvious that the rescue exercise was far from over as massive swells crashed against the surrounding reef and entry to the Kingston Pier. Through pitch black night the rescue vessels arrived back through the entrance, navigating reef and breaking waves to synchronize with the crane that would lift them above the thrashing water and enable rescue staff and crew to return to solid ground.

After Sputt Douran's boat was successfully removed from the water the *Advance II* was visible coming around the headland and with a deal of courage and expertise Darren Bates navigated the survivor laden vessel into line with the pier fenders and was craned from the water to an appropriate height enabling safe removal of all on board.

Throughout the round of applause and cheers that erupted, emergency staff and doctors assisted and moved passengers and crew by stretcher to the waiting emergency vehicles. After initial checks and thermal blankets were applied the ambulances moved swiftly to the Norfolk Hospital where further medical facilities had been prepared for the arrival of those rescued.

The Chief Minister expressed the thanks of all in the Norfolk Island community for the successful and well-coordinated rescue effort. "As a former long serving member of the RAAF, I have seen many coordinated operations and have an appreciation for precision and no-nonsense responses to emergency situations", Mr Nobbs said.

"Norfolk Island has never ceased to amaze me with its ability to maintain high standards of expertise, safety, bravery and genuine concern for those in peril within

our region. There are many people to thank as a result of this successful rescue operation, from the level headed pilot and crew of the Pel-Air Medivac aircraft, to the coordination team at our category six international airport. Volunteers, trained rescue and medical teams, marine craft owners and operators, the equipment technical support and the diligent and methodical team that not only coordinates these critical operations, but also ensures that training exercises are relevant to actual emergency situations and of course the members of the community who provide positive outcomes with their dedication to assist in such times of crisis. As we have come to expect, Norfolk has done us proud once again”.

André Nobbs
Chief Minister

19 November 2009