

Plane crash a tragic start to 2006

By Daniel Landon and Helen Anderson

A plane crash near Ipswich on January 2 that killed five people and seriously injured two others was a tragic start to the New Year for emergency services personnel.

But the crash of the single-engine Cessna 206 with seven people on board provided a real-life example of the close working relationship between DES personnel and other emergency service agencies.

The plane, which was carrying a pilot and six skydivers – three instructors strapped to three others for tandem dives – crashed into a dam shortly after take off, about 500m from the runway at Willowbank Airfield.

The crash sparked a massive response from emergency crews. The Queensland Rescue helicopter was on scene within 15 minutes, and Queensland Ambulance Service, Queensland Fire and Rescue Service, Queensland Police Service and State Emergency

Service personnel soon joined them. With the plane almost completely submerged into the dam, spotter planes and ambulance crews initially had trouble finding the crash site.

Ambulance officers soon came across one of the two survivors – a 27-year-old woman who had stumbled 300 to 400m from the scene – but she was not able to provide the location.

While paramedics treated the woman – she was stabilised and then taken to Ipswich Hospital and later Princess Alexandra Hospital – other paramedics continued searching.

Meanwhile, the five crew members on board the Queensland Rescue helicopter had limited information to work with – only knowing a plane had crashed near the end of the runway.

Pilot John Wilkie said it was not until after he had taken off from the base

at Archerfield they established that the plane had yet to be found. “The only information we had was that the Cessna had taken a turn to the right after take off. So we flew up the runway and did a similar right turn and spotted the crash site” he said.

After landing near the dam, Rescue Crew Officer Tim Walker, Rescue Crewman Mark Kennealy, and Intensive Care Paramedic (ICP) Rohan Foote went into action, swimming out to the wreckage.

“We had our flight suits on, so we stripped to our shorts and swam out, about 25 metres, to the plane,” Tim said.

“I swam the survivor in to the bank, and after calming him down we gave him to the doctor for treatment.”

The man had been holding the body of a deceased person, which Mark and Rohan took to the bank.

Police divers search the dam where five died in a plane crash. Photo AAP Image /Tony Phillips.

“We then went back into the water to find more survivors, but the visibility was zero and there was fuel and oil in the water. The aircraft was in a tangle and we cut ourselves trying to get low to look. It was just impossible to find anything,” Tim said.

Once the crew realised there was no chance there had been any other survivors – any persons would have been under water for 25 minutes by this stage – the crew prepared to fly the injured man to hospital.

“It was an emotional scene. Family and friends had been waiting nearby at the drop zone. It was difficult, but our job is to treat the injured and take them to hospital,” he said.

Once the chopper had landed and provided a reference point for other emergency crews, paramedics searching in the area were at the dam within minutes.

One of those was Intensive Care Paramedic and Acting Clinical

Support Officer at Ipswich Station, Wayne Kirk.

“We saw the chopper land and the crew run into the dam. We were about 400 to 500 metres away at this stage, so we got as close as we could, climbed through the barbed wire fence and made our way to the scene,” Wayne said.

After the male survivor had been brought out of the water, Kirk assisted the QR doctor to put in IVs and morphine.

Other paramedics then arrived on scene, and further assisted before QR flew the man to the Princess Alexandra Hospital.

At that stage it was thought there were still four people unaccounted for.

“It was a very hot day so we were standing by for the rescue workers,” he said.

“The aviation people were there early to have a look, with the disaster identification crew not too far behind, while the police divers came in the afternoon our primary

work was finished by about 11:45. The last of the bodies were then recovered by about 17:00.

“Police cordoned off the area near the fence, 100m from the dam, very quickly to keep media at bay. The amount of media was extraordinary – choppers flying in, TV crews – probably around 50 to 60 people including bystanders.”

Rohan Foote, the Queensland Rescue ICP said the response to the incident highlighted numerous examples of the great teamwork among rescue services.

“The QR crew had the expertise and training to get the helicopter to the location and search in the most likely location, and combined with the recent addition of a medical team – a doctor and ICP – at the base, we could transport a retrieval team to the scene without delay,” he said.

“It was a great team effort by the emergency services on the ground to minimise time at the scene and get the patient to hospital quickly.”