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### Title

Sea Dragon Down: The Human Cost of the Navy's Most Crash-Prone Chopper

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**Abstract:**

The MH-53E Sea Dragon helicopter is killing U.S. personnel at a higher rate than any other aircraft operated by our military. The U.S. Navy is aware of the risks posed by this helicopter, yet continues to fly it. On January 8th, 2013, a Sea Dragon crashed into the Atlantic Ocean off the coast of Norfolk, Virginia, during a routine training operation. Of the five crew members, three perished. A Navy investigation revealed Cold War-era wiring had been chafing against a fuel line, eventually igniting a flamethrower of jet fuel inside the cabin of the helicopter, causing it to crash into the Atlantic less than 30 seconds later.

The Navy uses this aging helicopter to sweep mines, dragging a mine-clearing "sled" through the water. The helicopter, first placed in service in the early-1980s, should have been retired in the early 2000s. Plans to replace the crash-prone copter were apparently shelved when the proposed replacement helicopter was deemed incapable of performing the Sea Dragon's mission.

As a result of the January 2013 crash, I have obtained an abundance of sources and documentation establishing that the Navy is well aware of the age-related risks posed by the Sea Dragon. This contradicts the Navy's public claim that it is "absolutely confident" in the safety of this helicopter and has "no concerns about the long-term viability of the aircraft." While it may have taken the tragic loss of life on January 8, 2013 to highlight the ticking time-bomb that is the Sea Dragon, that incident may serve to unravel the Navy's deadly missteps in its continued use of this troubled helicopter.

**Script:**

SUGGESTED ANCHOR LEAD-IN:

And now an NBC News investigation into the largest and oldest Navy helicopters-the MH-53E Sea Dragons. The Navy says they serve a vital mission that only a Sea Dragon can perform: underwater mine sweeping. But their safety record is alarming. In collaboration with our partners at the Virginian Pilot and the UC Berkeley Investigative Reporting Program, our senior investigative correspondent Cynthia McFadden takes a closer look at why the Sea Dragons are still flying.

Please note we \*MUST\* mentions partnership and the minesweeping mission in the anchor lead-in. See margin.

Track: Wes Van Dorn was a devoted family man. He loved his two little boys and he loved serving his country. The 29-year old lieutenant was a highly regarded Naval aviator, pilot of a MH-53E Sea Dragon- the navy's largest, oldest and most dangerous helicopter...

NICOLE VAN DORN:

03:18:44;01 I think that it's clear they're unsafe.

Track: His wife Nicole says her husband complained to both his superiors and to her about the helicopter's safety. In fact, this is a video he shot in 2012 of a Sea Dragon that crashed in Korea.

CYNTHIA MCFADDEN:

03:17:22;19 Was the Navy asking him to do something that they shouldn't have been asking him to do?

NICOLE VAN DORN:

03:17:27;00 I think so.

CYNTHIA MCFADDEN:

03:17:32;20 They knew that these helicopters weren't safe.

NICOLE VAN DORN:

03:17:35;10 //Well documented.

Track: Indeed it is. According to the military's own statistics, the Sea Dragon is three times more likely to crash than any other navy aircraft. And an astounding 30 navy men have died in Sea Dragon accidents.

Built in the 1980s, they are still in service 15 years after the navy started making plans to replace them. As the helicopters aged maintenance became a big issue - and what he saw, frightened Van Dorn.

NICOLE VAN DORN:

02:20:17;09 It shook him to the core.

CYNTHIA MCFADDEN:

02:20:24;08 He was afraid.

NICOLE VAN DORN:

02:20:27;13 Yes.

Track: And for good reason-just over one year ago Van Dorn's fears became a reality ... on a training flight off the coast of Norfolk, Virginia, old electrical wires chafed against a worn out fuel pipe, and within seconds...

DYLAN BOONE:

04:26:02;08 The smoke was just filling up the cabin.

Track: Dylan Boone, a young sailor on board, described the explosion.

DYLAN BOONE:

04:25:41;27 15 seconds, I believe was by the time that the fire erupted to the time we were crashing in the water. // When I woke up I was about 20, 30 feet under water.//

MCFADDEN:

04:35:47;29 Would you want to go up in one of those Sea Dragons again?

DYLAN BOONE:

04:35:51;28 No.

MCFADDEN:

04:35:56;29 Are they safe?

DYLAN BOONE:

04:36:00;09 I really can't answer that.

Track: Boone and one other man survived. Van Dorn and two others did not. Captain Todd Flannery, was in charge of Van Dorn's Sea Dragon squadron.

TODD FLANNERY NAT:

It's a joy to fly.

Track: He took us inside one of the huge helicopters.

MCFADDEN:

01:06:02;00 Were you aware that he was concerned about the safety of the helicopter?

TODD FLANNERY:

01:06:05;03 I was not.//

MCFADDEN:

01:06:11;25 Because he did complain to his superiors about what he saw as maintenance failures and a variety of problems with the aircraft.

TODD FLANNERY:

01:06:20;11 Uh-It didn't make it up to me, // he would have talked to his commanding officer with that.

MCFADDEN:

01:06:30;25 //Should you have known about his concerns?

TODD FLANNERY:

01:06:35;22 Yes, I should have.

Track: Captain Flannery says the Navy has worked hard in recent years to improve safety and he believes the remaining Sea Dragons are safe.

TODD FLANNERY:

01:10:31;21 I am not. I am-- I am extremely confident in this aircraft, and I would fly in it at any time.//

MCFADDEN:

01:14:57;06 Is there anything that would persuade you this shouldn't still be flying? I mean, it-- another crash? I mean, how many crashes do we have to have?

TODD FLANNERY:

01:15:07;15 We can't have another crash-- we just can't. It-- it would be too late to be dissuaded then if we had another crash.

MCFADDEN:

01:16:50;14 //Five people killed in four crashes--

TODD FLANNERY:

01:16:54;07 Yes.

MCFADDEN:

01:16:55;06 --in the course of two years?

TODD FLANNERY:

01:16:55;26 Yes.

MCFADDEN:

01:16:58;03 Those are odds I don't think most of us would wanna take.

TODD FLANNERY:

01:17:00;20 They are-- they are not good. Those numbers are not good at all.

Track: In fact, NBC News has talked to three other Navy air crewmen, who in the wake of the Van Dorn crash, now refuse to fly the Sea Dragons.

NICOLE VAN DORN:

03:22:27;09 The only reason I am sitting here is because Wes can't be sitting here, because he started something that unfortunately I need to finish for him.

Suggested LIVE TAG

Japan has retired their similar helicopter BUT to keep the Sea Dragons flying, the US has been negotiating to buy their spare parts....

\*Meanwhile just two weeks ago in another incident a Sea Dragon was forced to land in Kuwait because of electrical sparks in the helicopter.

**Source List:**

Nicole Van Dorn

Wes Van Dorn

Cheyenne Collins

Dylan Boone

Admiral Jonathan Greenert

Commander Todd Flannery

PAO Frank Kafka

Confidential Sources

Confidential Documents