



# REDCAP

# Mission

*Men rescued after  
chopper crashes  
off Florida Keys*

*By Janet Adams*

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*Searches for missing or overdue aircraft are called “REDCAP missions.” This incident in Florida Bay is compelling and hazardous: A hurricane is headed toward the Gulf of Mexico, parts of the Keys are being evacuated and the missing aircraft is a helicopter.*

## 2:00 a.m.

Civil Air Patrol's Hillsborough One Senior Squadron in Tampa, Fla., is tasked with a REDCAP search mission for a downed helicopter. By 4 a.m., the squadron's aircrew — pilot Lt. Col. Arnie Glauser, observer Capt. Gil Dembeck and scanner 1st Lt. John Yeninas — are on their way to Vandenberg Airport in Tampa.

## 5:14 a.m.

After departing Vandenberg, they arrive at Kendall-Tamiami Executive Airport in Miami at 6:42 a.m. While awaiting daylight and refueling their Cessna 182, the crew is briefed by the incident commander (IC). They will be searching for a red and white Robinson R-44 helicopter, N144SA, which departed the Tamiami airport the day before around 11 a.m. with four men aboard. The presumed coordinates, derived from radar data, put the copter's last known position near the edge of the Everglades and Florida Bay's open waters.

A Florida Fish and Wildlife helicopter and two CAP ground teams have joined the search and two other CAP aircraft will soon be aloft. Glauser's search route begins west of Tamiami airport at the 15-nautical-mile circle around Miami International Airport.

## 8:07 a.m.

Airborne again, the crew begins a systematic search from an altitude of 1,000 feet. After visually searching more than 40 miles of the Everglades, checking out one suspicious sighting and scanning the area around the coordinates of the last known position without finding anything, Glauser heads toward Florida Bay.

Background: A map of the CAP aircrew's route search pinpoints the location of the downed helicopter with a circled "X" on page 6.

## 8:45 a.m.

Yeninas spots something in the water to the left of the flight path. Glauser turns the plane for a closer look. "I could hardly believe what I saw," said Yeninas. "Four men are standing on a partially submerged, upside-down helicopter, waving frantically!" The IC's flight route had enabled the aircrew to locate the stranded helicopter on its first pass.

Glauser immediately contacts the Florida Fish and Wildlife pilot to report the downed helicopter's coordinates; he also notes the apparent good condition of the survivors. Fish and Wildlife notifies the Miami-Dade Fire Rescue Department, whose rescue helicopter was also in the area, having been alerted to the situation by the downed pilot's brother-in-law.

According to Lt. Frank Fernandez, paramedic



Helicopter crash survivors John Roa, Christian Rodriguez, John Devoney and Willie Earle stand with members of the CAP aircrew that rescued them. From left in blue CAP shirts are 1st Lt. John Yeninas, Lt. Col. Arnie Glauser and Capt. Gil Dembeck.

Photo by 2nd Lt. Ben Dickman, Florida Wing

A Miami-Dade Fire Rescue helicopter like this one was used to pluck four men from the Florida Bay. The men crashed into the water off the Florida Keys while on their way to a birthday party in Marathon, Fla. The men, all residents of the Miami-Dade County area, were not hurt in the crash and were in good spirits despite spending 19 uncomfortable hours on the downed chopper's floats.

Photo courtesy of Miami-Dade Fire Rescue



onboard the Miami-Dade Fire Rescue flight, two divers are lowered into the water to secure the lifting apparatus. A diver accompanies each survivor as he is lifted into the hovering copter. Commander Wayne Sessions, Miami-Dade Fire Rescue pilot, attributes the smoothness and immediacy of the rescue operation, which take just 20 minutes, to the crew's dedication to training. Once safely on board, the men are handed cell phones to call their families.

The rescued men appear to be uninjured and in comparatively good spirits, considering they had no water or food on their downed craft and had spent 19 uncomfortable hours on the copter's floats. They are still wondering how a simple jaunt to celebrate a birthday with a special luncheon in Marathon, Fla., went so terribly wrong.

As to what caused the crash, the owner and pilot, Christian Rodriguez, says in a TV interview at the Florida Keys Marathon Airport, "The copter started spinning out of control, so I took it down to 30 feet and popped the floats." While trying to make a water landing, the rotation of the copter caused it to flip over. The emergency locator transmitter shorted out, the radios proved useless and so did the men's cell phones. During the night, they say they heard a lot of thrashing around in the shallow bay waters, which did nothing to add to their comfort level — particularly since they had been circling to watch a bull shark devour a tarpon shortly before they crashed.



**9:30 a.m.**

Two ambulances greet the survivors when they land at Marathon airport. After being checked by the paramedics, who find nothing seriously wrong, the four decline further treatment and are flown by Miami-Dade Fire Rescue to Tamiami airport for a tearful, joyous reunion with their families.

The following morning, Dembeck receives this e-mail from one of the rescued men:

*Thanks to you and your team and people like yourselves, from the first phone call to get to you on down, (you) are true heroes and role models. Thank you. You don't know how happy I am to be home with my five children and my wife who had the worst evening of her life.*

*Forever Grateful, Christian Rodriguez, N144SA*

Thanks to the teamwork and dedication of more than 20 Civil Air Patrol members from the Florida Wing — some from as far away as Jacksonville — this REDCAP mission is a resounding success. Credit is also due to CAP's radar expert, Colorado Wing 2nd Lt. Guy Loughridge, for analyzing key radar data critical to the search's success. ▲