

Fatal HH-60W mishap investigation results released

JOINT BASE PEARL HARBOR-HICKAM, Hawaii – Pacific Air Forces released the results of its investigation into an aircraft mishap in Japan, April 22, 2025, where a spectator subsequently died from related injuries.

During an HH-60W demonstration at Kadena Elementary School, a Japanese civilian spectator fell to the concrete walkway, suffering severe head injuries. Evidence from the accident directly links the victim's fall to rotor wash—air flow generated from a helicopter's rotor blades—from the HH-60W.

Emergency medical personnel arrived at the school within minutes and immediately transferred the victim to U.S. Naval Hospital Okinawa via ambulance. Despite emergency medical efforts by doctors at the Naval Hospital and nearby Ryukyu University Hospital, the victim died from her head injuries on April 27. There were no other fatalities or significant injuries resulting from the accident.

The Accident Investigation Board determined the cause of the mishap was insufficient distance between the HH-60W and the victim. Her proximity to the arriving helicopter exposed the victim to rotor wash that knocked her to the ground, causing fatal head injuries. Additionally, there were three substantially contributing factors to the mishap: failures in mission planning and poorly staffed oversight processes; the combined impact of the individual's umbrella and age on her ability to withstand rotor wash; and an operational mindset fostering a false confidence of safety.

In accordance with AFI 51-307, Aerospace and Ground Accident Investigations, this Aircraft Accident Investigation Board conducted a legal investigation to inquire into all the facts and circumstances surrounding this Air Force ground accident, prepared a publicly releasable report, and obtained and preserved all available evidence for use in litigation, claims, disciplinary action, and adverse administrative action.

A copy of the full report may be viewed at www.afjag.af.mil/AIB-Reports/.