



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, although a remote and small community, had once again displayed its level of technical expertise and capacity to deal with challenging issues. 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.

The Chief Minister’s comments followed the successful rescue of six passengers from a medical evacuation aircraft en route from Western Samoa to Australia which made an emergency landing in the ocean near Norfolk Island in darkness late on Wednesday 18 November when it ran low on fuel after several aborted landing attempts in low cloud and rain.

The 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 following established emergency procedures were able to maintain floatation for the medivac patient, passengers and crew.

Although no mayday call had been received by the Norfolk Island airport, the duty airport manager immediately commenced emergency procedures and within minutes the emergency control centre was staffed and all police, emergency services and volunteer personnel were briefed and rescue crews were dispatched.

The Chief Minister said that what followed was a near textbook process of emergency services and rescue coordination. This involved constant communication with Australian and New Zealand emergency services and use of all available technologies to locate the aircraft, which had sunk too rapidly to allow the fixing of its position from its Emergency Position Indicating Radio Beacon (EPIRB).

Valuable local aviation experience was used to map out probable circuit paths taken by the aircraft to commence a coordinated coverage of the most likely areas. During this process, emergency lighting towers were erected at the Kingston Pier landing point, while a number of rescue boats were launched, equipped with rescue personnel and safety equipment.

A visual sighting of a faint light was made and two boats were dispatched to the area. Within minutes one boat had located and rescued the plane’s crew, passengers and patient.

All six rescued people were safely landed and after initial medical assessment by two local doctors were transported by ambulance to the Norfolk Island Hospital. Five people were treated and allowed to leave, while the original medivac patient remains under care in the hospital.

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 aircraft, to the coordination team at our international airport and all emergency services and volunteer personnel. As we have come to expect, Norfolk has done us proud once again".

André Nobbs
Chief Minister

20 November 2009