

Pilot dies as kit-built helicopter crashes

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A well-known pilot who died in a helicopter crash in the Pilbara was flying a new kit aircraft he had put together just weeks ago.

Police found 62-year-old Ross McDowell's body and wreckage of his helicopter in remote bush 11km north of Roy Hill Station in Nullagine yesterday afternoon.

A big aerial search for the Port Hedland man began after he failed to arrive at Roy Hill for a cattle mustering job on Tuesday afternoon. The veteran pilot of 40 years, with 30,000 flying hours, was flying 300km from Indee Station in the single-seat aircraft.

Police and the Australian Transport Safety Bureau will investigate the crash and prepare a report for the Coroner.

Sen. Sgt Dean Snashall, of South Hedland police, said debris was strewn over 200m.

"It was pretty clear it had been a catastrophic failing from the chopper," he said.

He said wreckage was found during what would have been the last search of the day.

Sen. Sgt Snashall said the number of people who helped in the search was a testament to Mr McDowell's popularity.

"The majority of people involved in the search from a helicopter perspective all knew the deceased and knew the family — it's quite a close-knit community the whole station, mustering community," he said.

Mr McDowell moved to Australia from New Zealand in the 1980s. He has reportedly been forced to make several emergency landings during his career and has been reported missing before.

Mundabullangana Station owner and helicopter pilot Michael Thompson said Mr McDowell was the most experienced pilot in Port Hedland.

"I don't think there would be too many people who had done more hours in the air than Rossy," he said.

De Grey Station owner Mark Bettini said Mr McDowell had also helped muster cattle on his station for the past 30 years.

On June 22, Airwork Helicopters reported Mr McDowell had completed the first test flights in his turbocharged Cicare CH7Bt kit helicopter without incident.

He is survived by his wife and adult children. Last month, Mr McDowell showed up a room of men half his age by winning the Beau of the Ball best-dressed prize at the annual Marble Bar Ball for the second year running.

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