

Rapid Lesson Sharing

Event Type: Snake!
on a Helicopter.

Date: August 27, 2015

Location: Kettle Complex Fire,
Washington State



NARRATIVE

*This story is told from the perspective of the
Helicopter Manager.*

Operations had us go up and do some recon. One of the fires in the Complex was picking up and had spotted. We were going to check that out.

About five minutes after taking off, I look down and there's a snake looking up at me.

He's by my right foot pedal, crawling out just inches from my foot. Right before the flight, I'd been talking to a local landowner about rattlesnakes—so that's my first thought.

I pull my foot back from the snake and it crawls into the helicopter's clear "chin bubble".

It looked to be about 12-18 inches long with diamonds on its back—like a rattlesnake. But I couldn't see its tail.

***About five minutes after taking off, I look down
and there's a snake looking up at me.***

I say to the pilot: *"I don't want to freak you out."*

Pilot: *"What?"*

"I got a snake by my feet."

Pilot: *"What?!!"*

"Yeah, it's for real."

Can't Do Mission Due to Snake in Helicopter

I radio Operations and Helibase to inform that I can't do the mission due to a snake in my helicopter.

As we return to Helibase, there is a suggestion. Apparently, the fuel truck driver likes snakes, so maybe he could get it out and we could take off.

I decide, no. Let's not try to do that with rotors running.



Helicopter opened up, searching for snake.

So we land and shut down.

The snake now slides into a hole in the cowling under my seat.

While we are looking for it, he pokes his head out a few times—and retreats back inside the cowling.

Not a Rattlesnake

One of the guys gets a look at the snake’s face. He says it’s not a rattlesnake. He says it could be a bull snake; they also have diamonds on their backs. We’re informed that



The culprit. Found alive and removed from aircraft.

most of the rattlesnakes in this area are timber rattlers. So we figure this one is probably a bull snake.

Can’t Find Snake—Decide to Put Helicopter Back in Service

We pull the helicopter apart trying to find the darned snake—but we never do locate it. We make the decision to put the aircraft back in service—even though the snake could be anywhere.

So, how did the snake get into the helicopter? We think it either crawled up the long line into the belly, or was hiding in someone’s line gear or in the bucket bag when we loaded it. (A SAFECOM was filed on this incident #15-073; <https://www.safecom.gov/searchone.asp?ID=19972>.)

Eight Days Later, Snake Crawls Out Again

Eight days later, while the relief pilot is in flight, the snake crawls out again.

The pilot lands and the fuel truck driver grabs it. It is confirmed to be a bull snake. It is released unharmed. (SAFECOM #15-073 was updated.)

LESSONS – Observations from RLS Team

This event is a good example of applying the sixth Fire Order in a critical situation:

“Keep calm. Think clearly. Act decisively.”

This RLS Submitted by: Brad Mayhew, Damen Therkildsen, and Patrick Romportl with support from the Pacific Northwest Wildfire Coordinating Group.



Pacific Northwest Wildfire Coordinating Group

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