

Coast Guard May Sink Career of Crash Survivor

By Susan Crabtree

U.S. Coast Guard Lt. Lance Leone survived a helicopter crash that killed three others and beat back criminal charges of negligent homicide — but now he says he is in a final battle to avoid being sacrificed on the altar of bureaucratic accountability.

Though the Coast Guard dismissed all the charges in the criminal case stemming from the crash, he thinks the service's top leaders are determined to force him out of the Guard, even though he says the causes were beyond his control and the Coast Guard itself was negligent in marking the power lines that downed the helicopter.

But after five crashes in 2010 — the most costly series of accidents in the Coast Guard's recent history — top brass are under pressure to hold someone accountable, Lt. Leone says.

After the thousands of hours of attorneys and review boards have spent scrutinizing his conduct the day of the crash, Lt. Leone continues to follow his family and colleagues' advice to trust the system.

After all, the tight-knit Coast Guard community has been a way of life for many of his family members. His grandfather and grandmother, as well as his father-in-law, were all in the Guard, and his mother and father are in the Guard auxiliary.

Review board

But Lt. Leone said a special review board has been convened solely because of a derogatory report about his conduct that day. He fears that the board, which holds his career in the balance, therefore may be unfamiliar with mitigating details about the case, especially information about the history of the power lines that ensnared his Jayhawk helicopter.

"All I can hope for is, they didn't have all the information," Lt. Leone told The Washington Times. "I think I was singled out because I was the only survivor. The misplaced accountability only becomes apparent after you look at all the facts."

After several positive performance reviews, he was recommended to be promoted to lieutenant commander, the next-higher rank. But the commander of the Coast Guard's Personnel Service Center sent his case before a special board, which is deciding whether to deny the promotion — a move that would ensure an end to his Coast Guard career.

The special board has completed its evaluation and will soon send its recommendation to Homeland Security Secretary Janet A. Napolitano, whose department oversees the Guard and who will have final say.

Homeland Security didn't respond to multiple requests for comment, but Lt. Leone and his

attorneys say they fear Ms. Napolitano is likely to follow the recommendations of the Coast Guard leadership.

Not a vindication

A Coast Guard spokesman told The Times that convening this kind of special board to evaluate a promotion is allowed under Coast Guard policy, although he did not say how often it occurs.

"The board has met, and the recommendations are under consideration," Coast Guard spokesman Carlos Diaz wrote in a lengthy response to questions from The Times.

The Coast Guard also points out that during Lt. Leone's military hearing, the investigating officer recommended dismissing all of the charges except one — finding reasonable grounds that Lt. Leone committed the crime of negligent dereliction of duty. As the co-pilot, that officer found, Lt. Leone should have told the pilot that he was flying the helicopter too low "under the circumstances of the flight," Mr. Diaz said.

As a result, the spokesman said, Lt. Leone cannot call the dismissal of criminal charges a full legal vindication even though the commanding officer decided not to pursue the lone charge

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