

HIGHLIGHTS

OFFICE OF THE HIGH COMMISSIONER
TRUST TERRITORY OF THE PACIFIC ISLANDS
SAIPAN, MARIANA ISLANDS



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Three Killed in Kusaie Medevac Plane Crash

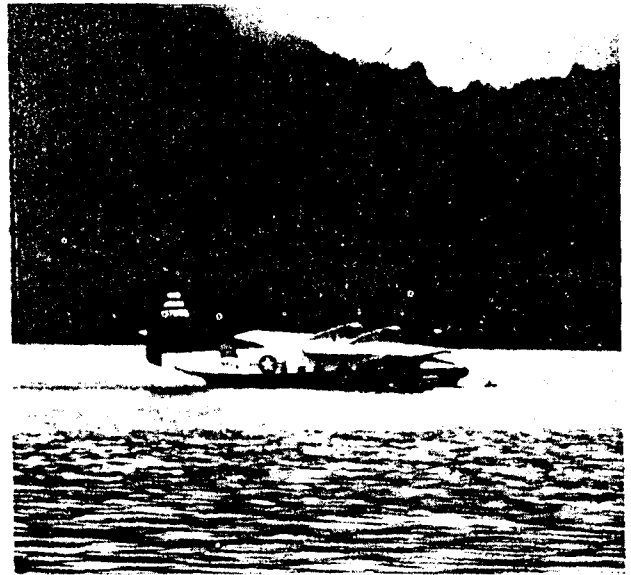
Three persons were killed Monday, June 25, in the crash of a U.S. Navy HU-16 amphibious plane in the lagoon off Lelu, the main town in Kusaie, in eastern Ponape District. The crash occurred Monday evening as the twin-engine aircraft was taking off from Lelu harbor on a "mission of mercy" medical evacuation flight, carrying a seriously ill woman.

The patient, 33-year-old Kenye Abraham, was one of those killed, as was her husband, Osamu, who was on board the plane as an attendant to his wife, who was unconscious and in critical condition. The third victim was a Navy crewman from the plane, Petty Officer First Class J.C. McGraw, who is missing and presumed to have drowned. The plane sank in 96-feet of water.

Witnesses said the plane appeared to take off normally, but was barely airborne when the right wing dipped sharply, catching the wingtip pontoon in the water and sending the plane spinning. Navy sources said the HU-16 was travelling at about 80 knots, or roughly takeoff speed, when the crash occurred. The water takeoff from Kusaie, which does not have an airstrip, is always a hazardous one. The Monday crash was the fourth involving an amphibious plane at Kusaie although it was the first involving any injuries or fatalities.

A total of 11 people were on the plane. Several of the survivors suffered injuries, but most were of a relatively minor nature. The Navy on Guam identified the crew and medical team on board as: Commander J.C. Kyes, the pilot; Lieutenant J.G. T. J. Milne, the co-pilot; Lt. J.G. W. Taylor, navigator; and crewmen J.D. Cox, A. W. Schler and J.W. Hardy, all petty officers. The doctor on board was Lt. D.F. Lynch, the most seriously injured, suffering a broken collar bone and facial cuts, and the medical corpsman was Petty Officer S.T. Smith.

Kusaie authorities reported that several local people also suffered minor injuries in the rescue attempt following the crash. A Boston-whaler type hospital boat and some smaller boats rushed to the scene, but as the individuals in the boats attempted to pull in those who were in the water, aviation gas spewing from the wreckage caught fire. The rescuers were forced to abandon their boats to save themselves. Three boats, including the hospital boat, were destroyed in the fire.



Navy HU-16 of the type which crashed at Kusaie last week. Photo taken at Kusaie's Lelu Harbor, October, 1972.

The HU-16 is a plane which is hardly used anymore anywhere in the world by the U.S. Navy, except in the Trust Territory. Prior to Monday's crash the Navy had three of the old, piston planes on Guam which were used primarily for medical evacuation flights to remote Micronesian islands without airstrips. A Navy spokesman Tuesday expressed doubt that the Navy will be able to continue operating the planes much longer.

Despite the many miles flown routinely in many differing types of aircraft over the years in the Trust Territory, the Monday crash was believed to be the worst in at least 25 years. Longtime employees of the TT Government could not recall any previous crash in which lives had been lost. Special Assistant for District Affairs J. Boyd Mackenzie, who has been in the TT since 1953, said he could not remember any plane crash fatalities in the years he has been there.



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