

3 people dead as State Troopers' copter crashes

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This 2008 image provided by the Alaska State Troopers shows their helicopter which crashed Saturday night March 30, 2013 while attempting to rescue a snowmobiler near Larson Lake 7 miles east of Talkeetna, Alaska. All three aboard are feared dead. (AP Photo/Alaska State Troopers)

By [Dan Joling](#)

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

ANCHORAGE — A veteran pilot whose name was synonymous with Alaska State Trooper wilderness rescues was at the controls of a helicopter that crashed Saturday night near Talkeetna, killing three people.

Mel Nading, 55, the primary pilot for more than 12 years of Alaska State Trooper Helo-1, died in the crash of that aircraft. Also killed were Alaska State Trooper Tage Toll, 40, and an injured man they had just rescued, snowmobiler Carl Ober, 56, of Talkeetna.

The director of the troopers, Col. Keith Mallard, said Monday that Nading had made countless rescues in the Eurocopter AS 350 and the deaths of Nading and Toll, a 10-year veteran, were felt throughout the department.

“It’s like a family member,” he said.

Nading was hired in December 2000 primarily to be the pilot of Helo-1, Mallard said. “In the time with us, he’s flown more than 3,000 hours, saved hundreds of lives,” Mallard said.

Toll had worked as a patrol trooper and wildlife trooper. He was a Kansas state highway patrolman before he was hired in Alaska a decade ago, Mallard said.

Both left behind families.

“Like family, we’re going to take care of the families of both pilot Mel Nading and Alaska State Trooper Tage Toll,” Mallard said.

Helo-1 is the only helicopter that troopers routinely used for rescues. The state is scheduled to take ownership of a duplicate, at a cost of \$3.2 million, in June. It was to have been based in Fairbanks, said Public Safety Commissioner Joseph Master.

The troopers were on a mission Saturday to rescue Ober, who called authorities to say he had suffered possible broken ribs while traveling alone on a snowmobile and had suffered possible broken ribs.

He said he was at Larson Lake about 10 miles east of Talkeetna, a community of nearly 900 that is the primary departure point for air taxis taking climbers to Mount McKinley.

Nading flew north from Anchorage about 80 miles and stopped to pick up Toll, one of three troopers assigned to the Talkeetna post, along with a sergeant and a wildlife trooper. Mallard said Nading always flew with a spotter, often another trooper but sometimes someone associated with a rescue group.

Mallard said he believed visibility was poor at time. Light rain was turning into snow around that time in Talkeetna but visibility was 10 miles, the National Weather Service said.

Nading and Toll spotted Ober, then radioed in that they had picked him up and would meet medics at a gas station in nearby Sunshine. The flight should have taken about five minutes over relatively flat terrain, but the helicopter never arrived. An Alaska Air National Guard helicopter spotted the burned wreckage Sunday morning. It had crashed in trees near the south shore of Larson Lake, and searchers found no survivors.

Mallard said he did not know how far the helicopter flew before it crashed.

He and Master said they could not speculate on the cause or whether it crashed immediately after taking off. The National Transportation Safety Board is investigating the crash.

Nading had been involved with one other crash in the same helicopter, a hard landing with no injuries Big River Lakes, about nine years ago, said Col. Gary Folger, director of the Alaska Wildlife Troopers.

Nading and Toll were the 14th and 15th Public Safety Department employees to die in the line of duty. Six other officers died in aircraft crashes.

The bodies of the three men were taken to the State Medical Examiner's Office in Anchorage, Mallard said.