A midair collision between a helicopter and a light plane at Reid-Hillview Airport in May was the result of an air-traffic control error that permitted the two craft to cross paths as they were taking off, according to the Federal Aviation Administration.

No one was injured in the collision, and both craft were able to land safely. Neither pilot was cited. And the controller, now stationed at San Jose International Airport, also did not receive a sanction, although he did undergo mandatory retraining after the mishap.

As a result of the incident, however, the supervisor of the tower and helicopter operators at the airport, situated in what is now a heavily developed area, have agreed on new safety measures for handling fixed-wing airplanes and helicopters.

"The mix is very tough to work with," said tower supervisor Denise Sanchez. "We had to set up procedures to keep these guys separated. They are currently in place, and there has not been one complaint."

In the May incident, the plane -- a Cessna 172 embarking on a sightseeing flight over San Jose -- had a half-inch of its propeller tips bent back when it hit the helicopter's right landing skid. "Given the fact two aircraft collided in flight while under Air Traffic Control... this incident involved an FAA Air Traffic Control operational error," the FAA report declared.

The author of that report -- obtained by the Mercury News under a Freedom of Information Act request -- was not identified, and the FAA was unable to say who made the findings. According to the report, the helicopter had been cleared by the tower to take off to the northwest from the north end of runway 31L (left) at about the same time that the Cessna was given permission to depart from the south end of runway 31L. Under flight rules in effect at Reid-Hillview, both aircraft should have stayed parallel and maintained visual contact until they were clear of the airport and able to turn safely. But the report said that from the front left seat of the helicopter, "(T)he Cessna pilot was not advised that a helicopter was ahead of him and off to his left side."

Other details

The report also noted that to proceed to San Jose, the Cessna would have had to take a slight left turn (in the direction of the helicopter), but added, "It was unknown whether the Cessna pilot turned. What is known is the aircraft did collide in flight while under air traffic control."
For the pilots involved, it was a very narrow escape. "I don't know how you could get any closer," said helicopter pilot Robert Dahlberg.

In his report of the incident, Dahlberg wrote, "We were climbing straight out, when at about 600 feet (altitude) I felt something thump the helicopter. It felt like we had struck a bird." Dahlberg said he immediately took control of the helicopter from his student and "about two to three seconds later I saw the aircraft appear in front of us moving left and descending."

**At the instant of impact, Cessna pilot Scott Mackey saw the helicopter directly above him and put his plane into a dive.** In his report, Mackey said he "should have visualized where the helicopter was and where he was going to be. After takeoff, if I couldn't see the helicopter, I should have asked the tower to help me get a visual and make sure I had separation." Mackey could not be reached for comment.

An FAA flight standards official with the regional office in Los Angeles emphasized that even when there is a controller on duty, the primary responsibility for staying out of each other's way lies with the pilots. This is the so-called "see and avoid" principle that is used at smaller airports.

But the FAA report also noted that while the helicopter was advised of the Cessna taking off behind him, "the pilot of the Cessna was not advised of the helicopter" by the air traffic controller who was handling the two aircraft at the time.

**Controller's response**

Controller Roberto Aranda said in his written statement that he didn't issue a warning to the Cessna about the helicopter's position because the Cessna "was halfway down the runway, had just started to be airborne and would outrun the helicopter." Aranda said he continued to watch the departures "and was satisfied their departure paths would not conflict." He then turned around to talk to other traffic in the pattern. Aranda declined further comment.

Dahlberg said Nice Air -- which owned the helicopter and the Cessna involved in the May incident -- and the tower have since moved the takeoff point for helicopters closer to the end of the runways where fixed-wing aircraft start their takeoffs. Because helicopters have blind spots below and behind them, Dahlberg said, this will help pilots spot each other better. It also will let tower personnel see helicopters and planes for a longer period of time as they depart. The tower has agreed to "stage" takeoffs differently, holding helicopters or planes, if necessary, to make sure they have each other in sight.

Reid-Hillview Airport -- built amid pastures, a golf course and an auto racing track as a private facility in 1939 -- is closely bordered now by shopping centers, schools and hundreds of houses. Because of its proximity to homes and schools, the airport -- now owned by Santa Clara County -- has become a sore point with its neighbors. Over the years, dozens of aircraft have crashed at or near the airport, but no one on the ground has ever been killed or injured.

One of the most serious accidents occurred in 1978 when a plane lost power on takeoff and crashed into the parking lot of nearby Smith Elementary School and caught fire, killing three passengers on board the plane. Some children were on the playground at the time and ran screaming as the plane approached, but the pilot apparently nosed the plane into parked cars to avoid them.

In 1987, a light plane also lost power and crashed into a house in a nearby neighborhood, killing three passengers and setting fire to the house.

In a 1972 mishap, a plane clipped the roof of Macy's department store in the Eastridge Shopping Center, and two or three others have crashed on the shopping center property. Close to runways.
Eastridge, once the site of a golf course, was built in the 1970s only 1,300 feet from the airport's runways.

The county has studied the feasibility of relocating the facility over the years, but an independent consultant in 1994 said the airport has an accident rate half the national average for small fields and is less a risk to its neighbors than stores, factories and auto traffic.

Dahlberg, who has been a helicopter instructor with Nice Air since 1998, said there is one aspect of the flight patterns at Reid-Hillview that still concerns him. When aerobatic planes take off, he said, they often rise at such a steep angle that they are well above the airport by the time they reach the middle of the runway. If a helicopter wants to turn to the east, he said, it crosses the middle of the runways west to east from the takeoff point. Ordinarily, planes taking off and landing are close to the ground at that point, and the helicopters pass high over them. But that's not true of the aerobatics, he said, and he'd like to see them roll farther down the runway before they make their steep climb.

But Dahlberg still considers Reid-Hillview an exemplary operation. "Given the number of takeoffs and landings, that airport is the safest in the United States," he said.

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