

The AW139 it has been replaced may be faster, can fly further and is NVG capable, but Bell 412 classic VH-NSC will be fondly remembered. PAUL SADLER



GOODBYE CHARLIE

End of an era for the Snowy Hydro SouthCare Rescue Helicopter Service

WRITER: PAUL SADLER

Late in the afternoon on April 1 the Canberra-based Snowy Hydro SouthCare Rescue Helicopter Service made its final life-saving flight. The mission, using SouthCare's blue, white and green Bell 412 'classic' VH-NSC, known affectionately as 'Charlie', brought to a close an 18-year career for what was a visual and audible icon in the ACT and southern NSW.

The primary response by the crew of 'SouthCare 1' was to a male motorcycle rider who had come off his bike on a dirt trail in the Brindabella Mountains, west of Canberra. Transporting him in a stable condition to The Canberra Hospital, the rescue was a routine one. Yet the mission, the last of more than 8,000 flown by Snowy Hydro SouthCare, officially marked the end of a helicopter rescue service that was passionately supported by the local community to a level some major sporting teams would envy.

Having safely handed over the patient to hospital staff, Charlie returned its crew to 'SouthCare Base' on the side of the Monaro Highway at Hume, south-east of the city, to be shutdown for what would

be the helicopter's final time on operation.

A new 10-year aeromedical rescue and retrieval contract for the Southern Zone of NSW would commence in Canberra the following morning on April 2, operated under contract by Toll Helicopters for NSW Ambulance and the ACT Ambulance Service (ACTAS), taking over the coverage provided by SouthCare for almost two decades.

A joint NSW and ACT government initiative in the late 1990s to provide aeromedical rescue and retrieval services to the ACT and southern NSW, SouthCare was established on October 1 1998 and began operations from a temporary facility at Canberra Airport before moving to a purpose-built base at Hume. ACTAS provided its intensive care paramedics to fly on the helicopter and conducted the day-to-day management of the operation, with CHC Helicopter providing the helicopter, aircrew and engineering support for the SouthCare Trust.

Charlie at work

By coincidence, ACTAS paramedic Michael Abigail, who flew on

SouthCare's very first mission on October 2 1998, also flew on SouthCare's final flight, in the meantime accumulating more than 1,000 hours in the back of the 412.

"Our first job was to Wagga Base Hospital for a secondary transfer back to Canberra," said Abigail.

"Leaving 'the office' for the final time was sad, but you look to the future now. It's a whole new platform, it's more powerful and its faster."

In the early days of SouthCare, when paramedics were not stationed at the base full-time, if a call came in for a helicopter mission, the nearest road ambulance with helicopter qualified paramedics on board would race to the airport.

"If we were in the middle of a job, you couldn't just drop everything and go," said Abigail. "We had extended response times to allow for us to finish up our treatment and to get to the airport. This sometimes delayed our departure by up to 45 minutes."

For ACTAS paramedics like Abigail, and the doctors from The Canberra Hospital, who fly the sky saving lives, moving from the

Bell 412, with its smaller cabin and modest cruise speed, into a larger and more capable Leonardo AW139 as part of the new era is most welcomed.

"There will be space for our medical packs in the AW139 whereas we made space for them in the 412 where we could," quipped Abigail.

"The transition for us to the AW139 will be a quantum leap when compared to our NSW Ambulance counterparts in Sydney for example who have transitioned from an existing AW139 into a brand new AW139. We will still give the same treatment using the same equipment, but it means the patients will get to hospital much quicker, which is advantageous for trauma patients when they become time-critical and need surgical intervention."

Sydney to Hobart

Just two months after the service began, the crew of SouthCare 1 would see themselves flying around 80nm offshore over the Tasman Sea off the far south coast of NSW in what would become the service's most recognised rescue mission.

As the fleet of yachts competing



in the 1998 Sydney to Hobart Yacht Race made its way south on December 26, a storm was brewing that would later smash the fleet as it headed into Bass Strait. A severe low pressure front formed whipping up 80kt winds and pounding waves reportedly up to 90ft high. In total, six lives were lost, 24 boats were abandoned or written off and 55 sailors were rescued.

Snowy Hydro SouthCare would be amongst the first rescue helicopters to be called into what became Australia's largest maritime rescue operation. The SouthCare 1 crew rescued nine sailors from two stricken vessels, *Stand Aside* and *Midnight Special*. Their heroics earned the service the internationally prestigious AHS Captain William J Kossler Award and a \$20,000 donation years later from the organisers of the race, the Cruising Yacht Club of Australia.

Dollars and cents

Even if the SouthCare Helicopter Trust has been wound up, its social media channels have been closed down and its major naming rights sponsor contract expiring at midnight on March 31, the legacy of the now former Snowy Hydro

SouthCare helicopter service will live on in the communities in which it served.

"Through our collective efforts over the years, the ACT and NSW governments now see a rescue helicopter as an essential service," read a statement from the SouthCare Helicopter Trust on its website. "Subsequently, eight purpose-built helicopters will be fully funded as part of an ongoing program serving southern NSW without the need for community fundraising. Every charity hopes to see the day when they are no longer required. Thank you to [the] amazing crew, donors, sponsors, volunteers and community members who helped us reach this milestone. Serving our region has been our greatest honour. We couldn't have done it without you."

ACT Emergency Services Commissioner Dominic Lane told *The Canberra Times* in February he would miss how the SouthCare partnership connected Canberra and regional communities.

"Under our new model we don't rely on community-based support and in many ways that's a good thing because the service is fully funded, but there are many people in the community with stories to tell about the life-saving mission our operation has been involved in and that is very important to share," said Lane.

"I think the key point is the new helicopter, because it is faster, more powerful and more reliable – as well as having traditional capabilities – means we can do a much better job of supporting our regional community and those people who need it the most."

Beyond the ACT, SouthCare 1 responded to medical emergencies on the NSW South Coast, the Southern Tablelands, Central West and Riverina regions and across

the Victorian border. During his more than 18 years riding to jobs in the 412, Abigail saw the connection communities built with the helicopter rescue service grow, from Albury across to Wagga Wagga, Deniliquin, Hay and West Wyalong.

"It's a big footprint that we have covered in the 412 and the fundraisers worked tirelessly to get sponsorships in each and every town and to get 'Friends of SouthCare' meetings up and running," said Abigail.

"I guess that is what will be missed in these country towns moving forward – no meetings and fundraising events now that we've been taken over by and fully funded by government."

No announcement on a future sponsor for the new Canberra-based helicopter had been made at the time of writing.

Goodbye Charlie

Senior base engineer for SouthCare Colin Hobbs was responsible for Charlie's maintenance and serviceability from day one.

"The 412 is a great workhorse with its lineage coming from the Vietnam War era Iroquois type," said Hobbs. "It was a great helicopter for doing the sort of work that we did in the area that we were covering. Like every machine, it had its idiosyncrasies but you learnt to deal and live with those over time."

The arrival in the territory of one of Toll Helicopter's eight brand new AW139s has not necessarily meant the end of the road for the 36-year-old Charlie, currently the oldest Bell 412 flying in Australia.

CHC confirmed Charlie's fate to *Australian Aviation* – the helicopter is being sold to an undisclosed local operator, meaning it might just venture back into familiar southern NSW and ACT skies in its new

life, albeit on a new mission and wearing new paint.

"Charlie very much became a part of my life, in fact, a lot of people's lives" said Hobbs.

"I first came across it in Adelaide in 1992 and had followed it around the country most of the time on various jobs and contracts so I was quite familiar with the helicopter when it started here on day one. So it will be a sad day when it leaves the base here for the final time. I live not far from the base so I'll probably watch it fly off from out the front."

VH-NSC departed SouthCare Base for the very last time on the morning of April 3, bound initially for East Sale, Victoria.

An new era begins

To mark the beginning of the new era in helicopter rescue on April 2, Toll Helicopters' first pilot rostered on at its Canberra base, Bryce England, acknowledged SouthCare in his first morning operational report to NSW Ambulance's Aeromedical Control Centre.

"Respectfully taking over the watch from CHC and SouthCare 1, whose crews have served this region faithfully and reliably for the last 18 years," wrote England. "We will continue building upon the legacy that CHC and Charlie have left behind. We have big shoes to fill."

While on shift at the base for day one of the new contract, Abigail explained beyond his qualifying training to convert on to the AW139, plus a ride-along in the type with a US law enforcement agency as a visitor a few years ago, he yet had to experience the capabilities of the helicopter while on a mission.

"I am looking forward to doing my first job in the 139," said Abigail. "It would be lovely to get the first job on this new contract as well, like I did when SouthCare first started. If I do get to do it, I can guarantee you I won't be getting the last job on this contract."

Minutes after this interview was completed, Abigail was indeed tasked on the very first mission, flying to Thredbo and to the aid of a young teenager who had crashed while riding his mountain bike through the wooded terrain of the Snowy Mountains.

A new era had begun. 



The final crew shot – just some of the many who flew on Charlie.

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