



Transport Accident
Investigation
Commission

Final interim report

Rīpoata Whakamutunga Mō Nāianeī

Aviation inquiry AO-2026-002
Airbus AS350-B3 helicopter, ZK-IJW
Collision with terrain
Mt Aspiring National Park,
24 kilometres west of Makarora
17 May 2026

September 2026



The Transport Accident Investigation Commission

Te Kōmihana Tirotiro Aituā Waka

No repeat accidents – ever!

“The principal purpose of the Commission shall be to determine the circumstances and causes of accidents and incidents with a view to avoiding similar occurrences in the future, rather than to ascribe blame to any person.”

Transport Accident Investigation Commission Act 1990, s4 Purpose

The Transport Accident Investigation Commission is an independent Crown entity and standing commission of inquiry. We investigate selected maritime, aviation and rail accidents and incidents that occur in New Zealand or involve New Zealand-registered aircraft or vessels.

Our investigations are for the purpose of avoiding similar accidents and incidents in the future. We determine and analyse contributing factors, explain circumstances and causes, identify safety issues, and make recommendations to improve safety. Our findings cannot be used to pursue criminal, civil, or regulatory action.

At the end of every inquiry, we share all relevant knowledge in a final report. We use our information and insight to influence others in the transport sector to improve safety, nationally and internationally.

Commissioners

Chief Commissioner	David Clarke
Deputy Chief Commissioner	Stephen Davies Howard
Commissioner	Paula Rose, QSO
Commissioner	Aedeen Boadita-Cormican (from 19 June 2026)

Key Commission personnel

Chief Executive	Martin Sawyers
Chief Investigator of Accidents	Louise Cook
Investigator-in-Charge for this inquiry	Ian M ^c Clelland
Commission General Counsel	Sid Wellik

Notes about Commission reports

Kōrero tāpiri ki ngā pūrongo o te Kōmihana

Nature of this interim report

The Commission issues interim reports in the initial stages of an investigation. The interim report presents the facts and circumstances established up to this point in the Commission's inquiry. The Commission may issue an interim report in line with international guidance where inquiries are complex and ongoing.

Final report

Upon the completion of the full investigation, the Commission will issue a final report on the incident after it completes its inquiry. That report will contain an analysis of the facts of the incident, findings and recommendations. The information contained in the Commission's final report may differ from the information contained in this interim report.

Photographs, diagrams, pictures

The Commission owns the photographs, diagrams and pictures in this report unless otherwise specified.

Time, altitude, distance and speed

Times referred to in this report are stated in the applicable local time, being either New Zealand Standard Time (NZST), which is Universal Time Coordinated (UTC) + 12 hours or New Zealand Daylight Time (NZDT), which is UTC + 13 hours. In New Zealand, in accordance with exceptions to the International System of Units and with the Aeronautical Information Publication New Zealand (AIPNZ) Gen 2.1, altitudes, elevations and heights are measured in feet. In this report these parameters are therefore only expressed in feet (ft) without a metric equivalent. Navigational distances are stated in nautical miles, vertical speed in feet per minute, and horizontal speed in knots (being nautical miles per hour) without a metric equivalent.



Figure 1: Airbus AS350-B3, ZK-IJW
(Credit: Alpine Helicopters)



Figure 2: Location of accident

Contents

Rārangi take

1	Factual information	5
	Background information	5
	Narrative.....	5
	Aircraft information	8
	Pilot information	8
2	Further lines of inquiry	9
3	Data summary	10
4	Conduct of the inquiry	11
	Abbreviations.....	12

Figures

Figure 1: Airbus AS350-B3, ZK-IJW	3
Figure 2: Location of accident	3
Figure 3: Witness photograph.....	7
Figure 4: Accident site.....	7

1 Factual information

Pārongo pono

Background information

- 1.1. On 17 May 2026, a pilot and a hunting party, consisting of a guide, a hunter and two passengers,¹ were using an Airbus AS350-B3 helicopter, registration ZK-IJW (the accident helicopter), to conduct aerial-assisted trophy hunting (AATH) activity in the Mt Aspiring National Park area. A second helicopter followed the hunting party. On the second helicopter were a guide and four passengers.²
- 1.2. Aerial-assisted trophy hunting (AATH) is the use of a helicopter to locate a trophy animal. The hunter is then offloaded with a guide to shoot the animal. The animal is later taken to a taxidermist for mounting. On this occasion the objective was for the hunter to shoot a tahr and a chamois.

Narrative

- 1.3. On 16 May 2026, The Alpine Group Limited, trading as Alpine Helicopters (the operator), pre-positioned two helicopters to be used for the AATH on a private property near Mt Barker. This was because of forecast low cloud or fog at Wanaka Aerodrome the following day.
- 1.4. At about 0700 on 17 May 2026, two of the operator's pilots prepared the helicopters for the day's flying. The weather was frosty, but the forecast was for a fine day with little to no wind and clear skies.
- 1.5. The two guides, one hunter and six passengers arrived shortly after and were given a safety briefing. The helicopters departed Mt Barker at about 0735, making their way north of Mt Aspiring National Park.
- 1.6. A tahr was located in the Landsborough area north of the Haast River and shot by the hunter. The tahr was recovered and both helicopters landed and shutdown to facilitate the taking of photographs. The tahr was then placed in the external cargo pod of the accident helicopter.
- 1.7. The two helicopters then flew to an area 24 kilometres (km) west of Makarora, where the hunting party located a chamois on the north face of Mercury Peak. The guide and hunter were off-loaded from the accident helicopter nearby. The pilot then flew the accident helicopter a safe distance away. The second helicopter also remained clear at this time.
- 1.8. The hunter shot the chamois, which fell into a gut.³ The pilot of the accident helicopter returned and uplifted the guide and hunter, flying them a short distance to a large flat area. The hunter and two passengers were offloaded to await the arrival of the second helicopter.
- 1.9. The pilot and the guide flew up the mountain face to retrieve the chamois. The accident helicopter was fitted with an EAGLEi 4K Video & Flight Data Recorder (the

¹ The two passengers were observing the hunting.

² The four passengers were observing the hunting.

³ A narrow deep ravine or gully.

cockpit camera), which was recovered from the accident site. The recording showed the accident helicopter was hovering by a rocky ledge. The guide was exiting the accident helicopter through the front left door when the accident sequence started. Marks on the rocks and tussock grass at the accident site showed that the main rotor blades had contacted the mountain face.

- 1.10. The main rotor blades were destroyed and the accident helicopter fell about 30 metres (m) down the mountain side. The helicopter's final position was at an altitude of about 5,700 feet (ft).
- 1.11. One of the passengers from the accident helicopter was observing the recovery of the chamois and took a photograph of the accident helicopter moments before the accident (see Figure 3). They then saw the helicopter falling down the mountain face and coming to rest below (see Figure 4). The hunter and two passengers alerted the pilot and guide of the second helicopter after it landed in an area just out of view of the accident a few seconds later.



Figure 3: Witness photograph

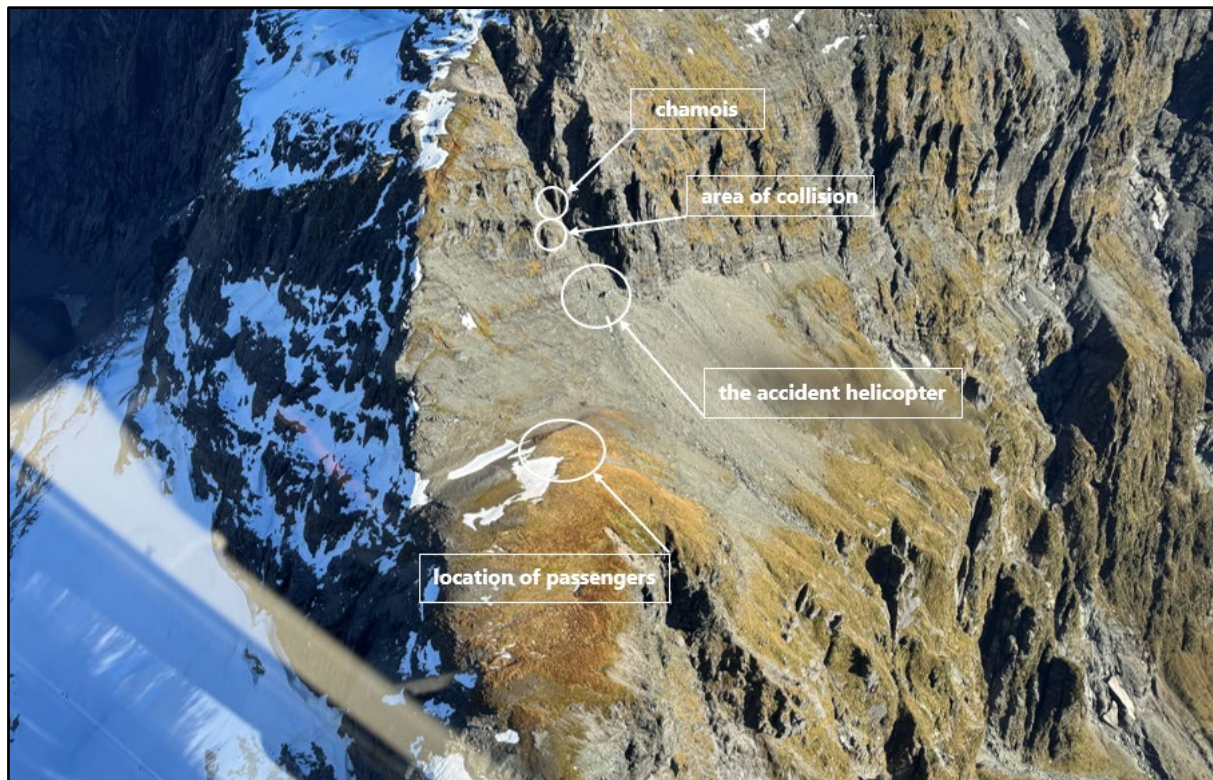


Figure 4: Accident site

- 1.12. The cockpit camera and the photograph taken by the witness indicated that the accident occurred at 0935.
- 1.13. The second helicopter pilot then manoeuvred the second helicopter above the wreckage of the accident helicopter and was able to direct the second guide on the ground to the pilot and guide. The second guide radioed the second helicopter pilot, advising the status of the guide and the pilot and that neither had survived the accident.
- 1.14. The second helicopter pilot immediately informed the operator of the accident, who activated their emergency response plan and contacted emergency services. At 0947 the Rescue Coordination Centre New Zealand (RCCNZ) was advised of the accident and initiated a response plan.
- 1.15. The second helicopter pilot took five of the passengers off the mountain and returned them to Wanaka. The second helicopter and the second pilot were then stood down by the operator. The second guide, the hunter and one passenger remained on the mountain.
- 1.16. Helicopters responding to the direction of RCCNZ collected the second guide, the hunter and the remaining passenger and transported them to an awaiting vehicle at Makarora. Later that day, members of the alpine cliff rescue team and NZ Police recovered the deceased.
- 1.17. The RCCNZ later advised that an emergency locator transmitter (ELT) signal from the accident helicopter had not been received. Examination of the accident site and helicopter confirmed that the ELT had activated but a broken aerial had prevented a signal from being transmitted.

Aircraft information

- 1.18. The accident helicopter, registration ZK-IJW, was an Airbus AS350-B3 helicopter, serial number 4735, constructed in 2009. It was powered by a Safran Arriel 2B1 turboshaft engine. The helicopter airframe hours at the time of the accident were 8618.
- 1.19. ZK-IJW was issued with a non-terminating certificate of airworthiness in the standard category. An annual review of airworthiness had been completed on 7 August 2025.

Pilot information

- 1.20. The pilot held a current medical certificate Class 1 and Class 2 and a Commercial Pilot Licence – Helicopter (CPL-H). They had approximately 6625 hours (h) total flying experience with 3570 h on type.

2 Further lines of inquiry

He pakirehua anō

- 2.1. A full inquiry into this occurrence is continuing. A final report, setting out findings, safety issues and recommendations, if any, will be issued at the completion of this inquiry.
- 2.2. The Commission is continuing to collate and verify evidence directly relating to this accident and is pursuing a number of lines of inquiry.

3 Data summary

Whakarāpopoto raraunga

Aircraft particulars

Aircraft registration:	ZK-IJW
Type and serial number:	Airbus AS350-B3, serial number 4735
Number and type of engines:	1 Safran Arriel 2B1 turboshaft, serial number 46372
Year of manufacture:	June 2009
Operator:	The Alpine Group Limited
Type of flight:	commercial air transport
Persons on board:	2

Crew particulars

Pilot's licence:	Commercial Pilot Licence – Helicopter
Pilot's age:	36
Pilot's total flying experience:	about 6625 h about 3570 h on type

Date and time 17 May 2026, 0935

Location Mt Aspiring National Park, 24 km west of Makarora
latitude: 44.209104° south
longitude: 168.92139° east

Injuries 2 fatal

Damage helicopter destroyed

4 Conduct of the inquiry

Te whakahaere i te pakirehua

- 4.1. On 17 May 2026, the New Zealand Civil Aviation Authority notified the Commission of the occurrence. The Commission subsequently opened an inquiry under section 13(1) of the Transport Accident Investigation Commission Act 1990 and appointed an Investigator-in-Charge.
- 4.2. A protection order was issued on 17 May 2026 relating to the accident site, helicopter wreckage, maintenance records and occurrence-related onboard and offsite data, including the cockpit camera.
- 4.3. On 18 May 2026, Commission investigators travelled to the accident site to secure evidence. Interviews were conducted with witnesses and other relevant parties.
- 4.4. On 23 May 2026, under the supervision of Commission investigators, the helicopter wreckage was removed from the accident site and transferred to a secure facility.
- 4.5. On 24 May 2026, the Commission received the cockpit camera from the operator, who had located it some distance from the wreckage the day before as part of their search outside the main debris trail.
- 4.6. On 31 July 2026, the Commission approved a draft interim report for circulation to six interested parties for their comment.
- 4.7. On 10 August 2026, one interested party provided a detailed submission and one interested party replied that they had no comment. Four interested parties did not respond despite efforts to contact them. Any changes as a result of the submission have been included in the final interim report.
- 4.8. On 27 August 2026, the Commission approved the final interim report for publication.

Abbreviations

Whakapotonga

AATH	aerial assisted trophy hunting
ELT	emergency locator transmitter
RCCNZ	Rescue Coordination Centre New Zealand

Kōwhaiwhai - Māori scroll designs

TAIC commissioned its four kōwhaiwhai, Māori scroll designs, from artist Sandy Rodgers (Ngāti Raukawa, Tūwharetoa, MacDougal). Sandy began from thinking of the Commission as a vehicle or vessel for seeking knowledge to understand transport accident tragedies and how to avoid them. A 'waka whai mārama' (i te ara haumarū) is 'a vessel/vehicle in pursuit of understanding'. Waka is a metaphor for the Commission. Mārama (from 'te ao mārama' – the world of light) is for the separation of Rangitāne (Sky Father) and Papatūānuku (Earth Mother) by their son Tāne Māhuta (god of man, forests and everything dwelling within), which brought light and thus awareness to the world. 'Te ara' is 'the path' and 'haumarū' is 'safe' or 'risk free'.

Corporate: Te Ara Haumarū - the safe and risk free path



The eye motif looks to the future, watching the path for obstructions. The encased double koru is the mother and child, symbolising protection, safety and guidance. The triple koru represents the three kete of knowledge that Tāne Māhuta collected from the highest of the heavens to pass their wisdom to humanity. The continual wave is the perpetual line of influence. The succession of humps represents the individual inquiries.

Sandy acknowledges Tāne Māhuta in the creation of this Kōwhaiwhai.

Aviation: Ngā hau e whā - the four winds



To Sandy, 'Ngā hau e whā' (the four winds), commonly used in Te Reo Māori to refer to people coming together from across Aotearoa, was also redolent of the aviation environment. The design represents the sky, cloud, and wind. There is a manu (bird) form representing the aircraft that move through Aotearoa's 'long white cloud'. The letter 'A' is present, standing for a 'Aviation'.

Sandy acknowledges Ranginui (Sky father) and Tāwhirimātea (God of wind) in the creation of this Kōwhaiwhai.

Maritime: Ara wai - waterways



The sections of waves flowing across the design represent the many different 'ara wai' (waterways) that ships sail across. The 'V' shape is a ship's prow and its wake. The letter 'M' is present, standing for 'Maritime'.

Sandy acknowledges Tangaroa (God of the sea) in the creation of this Kōwhaiwhai.

Rail: rerewhenua - flowing across the land



The design represents the fluid movement of trains across Aotearoa. 'Rere' is to flow or fly. 'Whenua' is the land. The koru forms represent the earth, land and flora that trains pass over and through. The letter 'R' is present, standing for 'Rail'.

Sandy acknowledges Papatūānuku (Earth Mother) and Tāne Mahuta (God of man and forests and everything that dwells within) in the creation of this Kōwhaiwhai.



Transport Accident Investigation Commission

**Recent Aviation Occurrence reports published by
the Transport Accident Investigation Commission
(most recent at top of list)**

AO-2024-005	Airbus Helicopters AS 350 BA, ZK-HJM, Impact with terrain, Paringa River, 40 km northeast of Haast, 20 July 2024
AO-2025-003	Bell Textron Canada Limited 206L-3 helicopter, ZK-IGD Loss of control – ground 4.5 NM west of Whakatāne, 27 July 2025
AO-2024-001	Bombardier DHC-8-311, ZK-NEF, Runway excursion (overrun), Timaru Aerodrome, 7 February 2024
AO-2024-004	Airbus A320, registration VH-VFF, Loss of control – ground (LOC-G), Christchurch, 31 May 2024
AO-2023-008	Q-300, ZK-NES and Beech 76 Duchess, ZK-JED, air proximity occurrence, near Brynderwyn, 28 August 2023
AO-2025-001	AS350 helicopter, hard landing, Mount Madeline, 12 January 2025
AO-2024-003	Airbus A320-232, ZK-OXJ and drone, Air proximity incident over South Auckland, 7 NM east of Auckland International Airport, 02 April 2024
AO-2023-003	Runway excursion (veer-off), Boeing 777-319ER ZK-OKN, Auckland International Airport, 27 January 2023
AO-2023-011	ZK-JED BE76 / ZK-WFS C172, near mid-air collision, Ardmore Aerodrome, 3 October 2023
AO-2023-010	Kawasaki BK117 B-2, ZK-HHJ, collision with terrain, Mount Pirongia, 19 September 2023
AO-2022-005	Boeing 737-484SF, ZK-TLL, Incorrect fuel configuration, Sydney to Auckland, 7 June 2022

Price \$10.00

ISSN 2815-8717 (Print)
ISSN 2815-8725 (Online)