

Whirlybird is the Word

By Reg P. Wydeven
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A few years ago Kimberly's Paperfest featured helicopter rides. My wife and I took a spin around the Village and even got a bird's eye view of our house. While we had a lot of fun, not everyone who takes a ride in a chopper is quite so lucky.

Famed rocker Tommy Lee recently took a 50-mile helicopter ride from Hollywood to Irvine for a Nine Inch Nails concert. While flying by helicopter is a common practice for celebrities, the problem with Lee's flight was that he didn't board at the airport.

Never one to follow the rules, Lee had David Keith Martz, the pilot, land on the street near his home to pick him up. Martz was charged by the City of Los Angeles with one count each of reckless flying, landing an aircraft on a public road and landing an aircraft without a permit. Each charge carries a maximum penalty of six months in jail and a \$1,000 fine.

Meanwhile, Sean Astin, best known for his roles as Samwise Gamgee in 'The Lord of the Rings' movies and as Notre Dame football underdog Daniel E. Ruettiger in 'Rudy', was recently sued by Kathryn Schlotzhauer for the wrongful death of her husband Roland resulting from a helicopter crash.

Schlotzhauer was a photographer and was filming a parade scene for Astin's new movie 'The Final Season' in Iowa when he was killed after the copter crashed into a cornfield. The pilot and Tony Wilson, the film's producer, were seriously injured in the accident.

The lawsuit seeks unspecified compensation for Schlotzhauer's death, in addition to \$50,000 in punitive damages, for "reckless" conduct. Specifically, Schlotzhauer's widow alleges the defendants failed to scout the area for the power lines that brought the helicopter down and that the pilot flew too low. The pilot and Wilson, together with Astin, are among 19 defendants named in the suit, including a special-effects firm and the rural electric cooperative that owns the power lines.

One of the most well known wrongful death lawsuits resulting from a helicopter crash involved legendary blues guitarist Stevie Ray Vaughn. On August 27, 1990, Vaughn had just finished a concert at Alpine Valley when he boarded a chopper bound for Chicago Midway Airport. The Bell 206B helicopter crashed shortly after takeoff and all five people on board were killed.

Vaughn's family settled their lawsuit against Omniflight Helicopters for an undisclosed amount. The suit alleged the company was negligent in using an unqualified pilot, who, in turn, negligently took off in dense fog.

Finally, Sikorsky Aircraft Corp., manufacturer of the famed Blackhawk helicopter featured in the movie 'Blackhawk Down', recently filed a lawsuit against the Pentagon to prevent it from releasing documents on possible quality-control problems with the helicopter to a Connecticut television station.

WTNH-TV previously aired a story claiming that defective parts were being installed on Blackhawks and then followed up with a Freedom of Information Request for documentation of corrective-actions taken since the piece aired. After the Defense Department granted the request, Sikorsky filed suit to stop the release. The station feels the American public has a right to know the safety of its military vehicles, especially during this time of war.

Sikorsky claims it filed the suit because the requested information could fall into its competitors' hands. Believed to be the first-of-its-kind lawsuit, we'll have to wait to see if Sikorsky's story flies.

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