

RAF crews help rescuers find downed pilot in Cairngorm blizzards

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Two RAF Search and Rescue helicopters joined mountain rescue teams to locate the pilot of an aircraft that went missing over the Scottish Highlands in some of the worst weather conditions seen by crews in recent years.

The Piper Saratoga aircraft left Carlisle at around 0900 hours on Saturday 5 April 2008, bound for Wick in Caithness. The alarm was raised shortly before 1100 hours, when the pilot reported icing and severe weather conditions before losing contact with air traffic control as he flew over the Cairngorms.

The rescue teams, including RAF Sea King helicopter crews from RAF Kinloss and RAF Leuchars, began their search at 1100 hours on Saturday morning. Operating in severe blizzards and temperatures of minus 24C, the crews found themselves unable to carry out an aerial search of the area. Instead, they provided transportation for the civilian mountain rescue teams, inserting them onto the mountainside around the probable crash area.

Initially, the search area covered 50 square kilometres - it was unknown how far the aircraft had travelled since the pilot last checked in with air traffic control. In such atrocious conditions, and with constant, heavy snowfall conspiring to conceal both plane and pilot from sight, it seemed as though the rescue teams might have to concede defeat to the elements.

But, at air traffic control, a dedicated team had managed to identify the aircraft's radar signature from the time at which they had first lost contact with the pilot. They were then able to follow the Piper's last airborne moments and predict its likely location on the ground.

Armed with the new information, members of the Cairngorm Mountain Rescue Team eventually found the wreckage of the aircraft, partially buried in the snow on Cairngorm Mountain, 1km from the funicular railway, just before midday on Sunday, 6 April 2008. Sadly, the pilot had died in the crash.

Michael Mulford, principal spokesperson for UK military Search and Rescue, said:

"These were the worst search conditions we have had to endure for several years. We commend the extraordinary efforts made by the mountain rescue teams, military and civilian, hour after hour in Arctic conditions. Not all Search and Rescue operations have a happy ending, but at least we were able to return the pilot to his family."



Members of the Cairngorm Mountain Rescue Team at the crash site on Cairngorm Mountain [Picture: RAF]



Wreckage of the Piper Saratoga on Cairngorm [Picture: RAF]