

5 bodies recovered from downed Chinook

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CEBU CITY - The bodies of five American servicemen were recovered from the wreckage of the Chinook MH 47 helicopter that crashed some seven miles south of Apo Island in Negros Oriental on Feb. 22.

Capt. Enrico Canaya, spokesperson of the Tactical Operations Command, told the Inquirer the bodies would be taken to the Benito Ebuen Airbase in Mactan, Cebu, before being flown to the United States.

Canaya said recovery operations would continue for two more missing American servicemen who were on board the ill-fated Chinook.

Ten servicemen died in the crash. The bodies of three of them were recovered immediately after the accident in which the helicopter reportedly burst into flames before crashing into the waters off Apo Island on its way to Ebuen Airbase from Basilan.

Last Monday, the US Armed Forces started salvage operations for the Chinook. At least 18 US Marines from the 510th Joint Task Force based in Zamboanga City took part in the search and recovery operation.

The US Army, which has been in charge of the recovery operation, had contracted the MV Jan Steen, a Dutch multi-purpose offshore support vessel that has the capacity to reach depths not ordinarily reached by US Navy vessels.

Sources in Negros Oriental told the Inquirer that four bodies were recovered Thursday morning while one was recovered at night. The wreckage was located in about 500 meters of water about six miles south of Apo Island. The helicopter was broken into 25 pieces spread over a 450-meter circumference.

Canaya said the Americans' remains would be brought to Ebuen by boat.

American Maj. Cynthia Teramae, spokesperson of the Combined Information Bureau, said that with the recovery of the bodies, the salvage crew working in the waters off Negros Oriental would concentrate on looking for the two remaining bodies.

At least 10 US servicemen were on their way to Cebu when the Chinook they were in crashed off Zamboanguita in Negros Oriental, some 150 miles northeast of Zamboanga City.

"(The) recovery operations to locate the two remaining missing crewmen continue," Teramae said.

She said the recovered bodies will be taken to the Ebuén Airbase where US mortuary specialists will "prepare the remains for transportation to the Charles C. Carson Center for Mortuary Affairs at Dover Air Force Base" in Delaware.

"After processing, the center will turn over the remains to their next-of-kin for burial," Teramae said.

The recovery of the five victims came after the US military's Naval Sea Systems (NAVSEA) Command used high tech equipment used in extensive salvage and recovery operations.

"NAVSEA provided a US government-owned towed pinger locator, a remotely operated vehicle known as 'deep drone' and a shallow water side-scanning sonar search system known as SWISS," Teramae said.

The deep drone, she said, has an underwater camera and a sonar location system.

"It is capable of covering a wide range of depths. It is equipped with manipulator arms and claws to pick up items. The SWISS was selected for its ability to operate in this particular ocean area and in average sea state conditions," Teramae said.