

Widower Sues Rolls-Royce, Others Over 2021 St. Thomas Helicopter Crash That Killed Pilot Maria Rodriguez and Three Passengers

The complaint cites witness video of black smoke and sudden engine silence, toxicology findings clearing the pilot, and an investigation pointing to compressor failure. Damages sought include funeral costs, pain and suffering, and losses suffered.

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Emergency personnel at Botany Bay, the scene of a deadly helicopter crash that occurred during the afternoon of Mon., Feb. 15, 2021. By. KYLE MURPHY FOR VI CONSORTIUM.

The widower of helicopter pilot Maria Rodriguez has filed a wrongful-death lawsuit against Rolls-Royce Corporation and several other companies, alleging their failures in the construction, servicing, and inspection of a Rolls-Royce engine caused the 2021 crash near Botany Bay, St. Thomas, that killed Ms. Rodriguez and her three passengers.

On February 17, 2021, residents with a view of the skies over Botany Bay watched a Caribbean Buzz helicopter suddenly descend and crash, killing Rodriguez along with Daniel Yannone, Neisha Zahn, and Tyler Yannone. According to the complaint, at least one witness recorded a video showing the aircraft emit “a large cloud of black smoke” before losing altitude. The filing states that the “loud sound of the helicopter’s engine” stopped immediately after the smoke appeared, with the sudden silence indicating “sudden and complete loss of power.”

Toxicology reports later confirmed that Ms. Rodriguez had no alcohol or non-prescription drugs in her system, and the lawsuit asserts that “there is no evidence that pilot error contributed to the crash.” A preliminary investigation by Caribbean Buzz concluded instead that “the helicopter crashed due to a contained failure within the compressor section of the helicopter’s engine.”

The aircraft’s Rolls-Royce engine had been installed in 1981 and overhauled between December 2008 and January 2009. During that overhaul, the compressor was removed for inspection and reassembled with a new stage 1 compressor wheel, stage 2–3 compressor wheel, and impeller. Two years before this overhaul, Rolls-Royce had released new compressor wheels manufactured through a different process, which the company stated made them less prone to casting defects. However, according to the lawsuit, Rolls-Royce did not recommend replacing older compressor wheels with the newer versions until 2023. The complaint does not assert whether the helicopter’s engine received the older or newer wheels during the 2009 overhaul.

Filed by widower Nicolas Van Heurck, the lawsuit names Rolls-Royce, Boeing Distribution, Inc., Aviall, Inc., and Jay Lammering as defendants. It alleges they jointly caused the wrongful deaths by failing to exercise “reasonable care in the construction, distribution and servicing of the engine as well as its components.” The complaint accuses the companies of negligence for allegedly failing to properly complete repairs, conduct adequate inspections, or test materials used in the engine during the overhaul process. Additional claims include breach of warranty, breach of contract, loss of consortium, and pre-impact terror.

The filing seeks damages for funeral expenses and for the physical pain and mental anguish Ms. Rodriguez may have experienced as the helicopter descended, including what the lawsuit describes as the conscious fear of impending death. The suit also requests damages for the losses suffered by her surviving relatives as wife, mother, and business partner.

As of press time, none of the named defendants have filed a response to the complaint.