HELICOPTER CRASHES INTO PEARL HARBOR

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A private helicopter with five people on board crashed Thursday into Hawaii's Pearl Harbor, leaving a teenager in critical condition, officials said.

The Bell 206 aircraft made a hard landing and sank near the Pearl Harbor Visitor Centre, a popular tourist destination on Oahu, US Navy spokeswoman Agnes Tauyan said.

The names of the five people on board were not immediately released.

"We are told bystanders jumped in to help rescue these patients from the water," said Shayne Enright, spokeswoman for Honolulu emergency services department.

One of them was Chris Gardner, a tour guide with Keawe Adventures who was with a group of tourists at the visitor centre when he heard the crash.

"I took off my shirt and dove in," he said, describing how he, a navy sailor, a federal police officer and another man took turns diving to the submerged helicopter and trying to free a passenger with a knife. "He was strapped into his seat in the back of the aircraft."

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They eventually freed the teenage passenger.

The helicopter crashed about 10 metres offshore, right next to the visitor centre's lawn, said tourist Justice Winrich of Madison, Wisconsin. She watched as it "plopped down" into the water.

"I saw it like as it was coming in, and it looked pretty normal. It didn't look like it was shaking or anything," Ms Winrich said. "It just started like getting really close this way and started going down." She thought it was strange that the helicopter was that close to people.

As it got closer to the water, she saw some dark smoke coming out of the back of the helicopter, and it started shaking slightly.

Ms Winrich saw three people get out of the helicopter immediately and start swimming to shore.

"I was like, oh my God, I can't believe this just happened. It was crazy," she said. "You go on vacation and you never think you're going to see something like that."

Her father, Shawn Winrich, caught the crash on video. His footage shows the helicopter heading toward the water and then crashing down. The blades stop spinning as it turns over in the water.

Local author Allan Seiden was signing books at the visitor centre when someone told him a helicopter crashed. He rushed over to where people were gathered, but by then the helicopter wasn't visible.

"I think it sunk instantly," he said.

Mr Seiden watched as the helicopter's occupants — including a man in a neck brace — were carried away on stretchers. "People were very calm. ... You could tell everyone was very shocked," he said.

Federal records show the helicopter is registered to Jeffrey Gebhard of Kailua, Hawaii. He could not immediately be reached for comment.

The US navy said in a statement that the helicopter reportedly belongs to Genesis Aviation. A website for Genesis Helicopters says it conducts helicopter tours over Oahu and that Gebhard started Genesis in 1999.

Honolulu paramedics treated the 16-year-old passenger and took him to a hospital in critical condition, Mr Enright said.

"It was a team effort and we pray that he's OK," Mr Gardner said of the teen he helped free from the helicopter.

"It's part of the instinct growing up in Hawaii," he said of jumping in to help.

A 45-year-old woman and a 50-year-old man were taken to the hospital in stable condition. Details on the two other people on board, including the pilot, weren't immediately available.

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