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Helicopters and horses send Morris Plains parade-goers to hospital

By Kevin Coughlin

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Two people were taken to Morristown Memorial Hospital today after being injured in separate incidents--one involving a helicopter fly-over, the other involving a pair of horses that ran amok in a parking lot--during the Morris Plains Memorial Day Parade.

Police said a five-year-old girl was cut on her head by a falling branch, blown from the rotor wash of a low-flying Coast Guard HH-5C Dolphin helicopter that was part of the parade. The girl had been watching the parade from the front of the Borough School.

And as the parade was winding down, a 62-year-old Chester man was badly bloodied after being pinned under his horse-drawn carriage during a terrifying sequence in which two child passengers narrowly escaped serious injury.

"This is pretty upsetting," said Mayor Frank Druetzler, still in his Uncle Sam costume, moments after the horses staged their mini-stampede.

It marked the third straight year that unsettling events have disrupted the patriotic parade in this otherwise-placid community. Two years ago, a marching band member fell from a vehicle. Last year, a bear loped through the parade.

Coast Guard Lt. Neal Corbin said the flyover incident, brought to the Coast Guard's attention by MorristownGreen.com, is under internal review by the service and the Morris Plains police.

Two other parade-goers were grazed by another hurtling branch, but they declined a trip to the hospital.

Maria Martinez, 38, of Morristown, used her body to shield her son, Daniel, and took a mild gash to her left cheek and minor scratches to her left arm and palm.

"In the moment it was very scary, and I guess they just didn't think about how low the helicopter was flying," said Maria, who had been watching the parade near Friendly's on Speedwell Avenue.

The down-draft from the chopper, which had a Morris Plains native on board as its flight mechanic, was so powerful it sent an empty baby carriage flying clear across Speedwell Avenue, according to police.

Federal aviation rules allow helicopters to operate below 500 feet when it poses no danger to those below, said Lt. Corbin, from the Atlantic City air station where the flight originated. The flyover had been requested by parade organizers.

"It's not the intention of the Coast Guard to cause any harm," he said. "Normally, we don't operate at those altitudes."

As the parade was concluding, another near-tragedy unfolded in the Veterans of Foreign Wars parking lot, where the post-parade barbecue was about to begin.

A pair of 1,800-pound Clydesdales got spooked when the carriage they were pulling--with two adults and two children inside-- got stuck during a U-turn and then flipped onto its side.

The horses, named Sonny and Cinder, chugged for a horrifying stretch, dragging the flipped carriage.

Nine-year-old Tommy Palazzo of Randolph tumbled out first, while his friend, 8-year-old Nicole Afflito of Wayne, clung to a ledge of the carriage, inches from the speeding asphalt below.

When the carriage slammed off a signpost and curb, off-duty Morristown policeman Scott Weaver plucked Nicole from the carriage, according to observers.

Out jumped the horses' trainer, Heidi Ort, who skinned an elbow, police said.

Nicole's uncle, Bill Barbato, 62, of County Landscaping in Chester, did not fare as well.

He was in the carriage and wound up being dashed against the curb, with the carriage toppling onto him. He also got kicked two or three times by the horses, said Morris Plains Police Officer Tom Keane.

At that point, Scott Weaver and his brother Brent, a Morristown carpenter, said they righted the carriage and attempted to steady it.

But the horses took off again, hauling the now-empty carriage to the back of the crowded parking lot until they got wedged between two parked cars. They smashed rear tail lights and dented the vehicles while squeezing between them--snapping free from the carriage hitch in the process.

Finally, the trainer caught up to the animals and calmed them.

"We were turning, and then all of a sudden something spooked the horses," recounted Nicole, as paramedics tended to her uncle. "Uncle Bill went under and scraped his ear and everything. . . It was scary."

"It was nasty, pretty frightening," said Brent Weaver. "There were people everywhere."

Bill Barbato, bleeding from injuries to his ear, head, knee and wrist, was taken to Morristown Memorial Hospital.

"He was conscious, but he took a pretty good beating," said Officer Keane.

"That little boy and little girl, they were big-time lucky" to escape injury, he added.

Bill Barbato's wife, Angela, said her husband spent the afternoon at Morristown Memorial's emergency room, where he received a CT-scan and glue to close head wounds. He has two broken ribs, she said.

"He's just all bruised. The skin was ripped off his back, stomach and arms," said Angela, who is Nicole's grandmother.

The identity and condition of the five-year-old girl whose head was bloodied by a falling branch could not be determined.

The horses were from Willow Grove Farm in Long Valley. One of the horses cut its left hind leg slightly, according to Officer Keane.

Nicole said they did the same carriage ride, with the same horses, in last year's parade, without any problems. She thinks she will "do it one more time," though she admits she will be "a little" scared.

As for the man who rescued her from the toppled carriage, "I want to tell him thank you," Nicole said.

More than 100 groups had turned out on a sunny morning for the borough's 23rd annual Memorial Day Parade, which paused while authorities helped the victims of the falling branches.

Now, local officials are wondering what's next.

"Next year, we're expecting Bigfoot," said Officer Keane.

Perhaps only half jokingly, parade Chairman Steve Welsh said there won't be a next year: He's declaring a pre-emptive rainout.

MG Correspondent Jacob Byk contributed to this report.