

# SUPPLEMENT No. 2 TO THE **HISTELEC NEWS**

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## **SEEBOARD EXPERIENCES**

by John Perkin

*John Perkin is a member and the Electrical & Mechanical Engineer and Energy & Water Manager with Taunton Deane Borough Council. Between October 1969 and April 1970 as an Overhead Line Engineer with the South Kent District of Seeboard, he was diverted to assist with repairing the damage caused by the Blizzard of the Wednesday 4<sup>th</sup> March 1970. He was requested to transfer to Commercial Engineering the next month in April 1970.*

Severe blizzard conditions in the South East of England on 4<sup>th</sup> March 1970 brought with it wet snow with ice formation causing the loss of many thousands of consumers due to overhead interruptions of 132, 33, 11, 6.6 kV and MV/LV circuits. A peak wind speed of 42 knots was recorded at Folkestone at 18.00hrs, with snowfall ceasing around midnight.

Around midday on that day I was undertaking surveys with a Student Engineer to the east of Folkestone when almost white-out conditions descended upon the area. I radioed into the Control Centre for instructions and was requested to return to the office. For the next three and a half days, I was immediately given HV authority and sent out with linesmen in a LandRover to replace overhead line fuses in the Romney Marsh area of the District as directed by radio communication. I was eventually sent home almost exhausted on the following Saturday lunchtime.

As a thank you to all of the many staff involved, Seeboard gave a dinner dance at one of the big hotels in Folkestone a few months later.

It is interesting to note that SWEB helicopters played a major role in making the repairs after the blizzard. One helicopter was obtained from the RAF and two helicopters from SWEB. These left their base at dawn on Thursday 5<sup>th</sup> March and following refuelling at Redhill, they were directed by the Kent Group Control at Rochester to various duties. The R.A.F. helicopter was under the direct control of the Kent Group Control and was

employed patrolling the Canterbury/Betteshanger 33kV circuits by this means five broken spans were found on the Betteshanger/Tilmanstone section. This helicopter was also used for lifting personnel into Wingham and Snowdown together with the necessary materials to repair 33 kV faults. It was soon apparent that the RAF helicopter was of limited effectiveness, when used to patrol overhead lines. This was entirely due to the inexperience of the pilot in this type of work, together with the inexperience of the Seeboard observer. The capability of such a crew is restricted in the main to the lifting of men and materials in and out of snow bound areas. It was the opinion of the RAF during Thursday afternoon that the "disaster" aspect of the work was receding and the helicopter returned to base at 15.30 hours.



The SWEB helicopters were allocated to South Kent district and a landing site was arranged near Folkestone. By 11.00 hours on Thursday 5<sup>th</sup> March, both helicopters were in service on line patrols designed to establish points of damage on the 11kV system. They continued working on these patrols until dark and were invaluable in identifying and appraising the extent of damage. A South Kent engineer was attached to each helicopter to provide personal knowledge of the routes to the lines, thereby directing the helicopter crews more efficiently in their patrols. Both SWEB helicopters continued operating on Friday on line patrol work, gradually turning their attention to the provisions of men and materials at isolated positions. By now it had been decided to operate the helicopters from Ashford Airport, since facilities existed there for fuelling and maintenance. At one time during Friday afternoon weather conditions deteriorated with intermittent snowfall occurring and for a short time they had to return to Ashford, since flying was impossible. They had however taken off at the earliest possible moment, while weather conditions were still somewhat imperfect. It was not until mid-day Saturday 7<sup>th</sup> March that the helicopters were released, since all line patrols had been completed and all equipment and personnel transported. By now road conditions were rapidly improving enabling normal access to be gained.

An article in the Seeboard publication "South East England Blizzard 4<sup>th</sup> March 1970" is quoted as follows:-

"Mention has been made of many odd useful aspects of helicopter work. Not the least of these was advice on passable road routes, which were given, thereby enabling access routes to damaged lines to be determined. It is quite clear that the service provided by the helicopters was invaluable in this emergency, particularly the service provided by pilots and crew experienced in overhead line patrol work. There is no doubt that in the South Kent district very considerable savings in time were affected by the information and transport provided by these aircraft. Their outstanding contribution, the evaluation of damage, transport of men and materials and

rapid assessment of access facilities, cannot be over-emphasized. On Thursday 5<sup>th</sup> March, movement by road was largely impossible throughout Canterbury and South Kent Districts, but the availability of the helicopter assistance enabled line patrols to be instituted, staff to be lifted into situations and materials to be dropped at many points. Some 36 hours of flying was achieved during the emergency, 6 hours by the RAF and 30 hours by SWEB helicopters. During this flying, some 250 miles of lines were inspected, 52 major faults found and some 75 flying sorties made. The Board is currently considering entering a consortium with the SWEB, SWaEB and MEB and experience in Kent has undoubtedly contributed greatly towards Seeboard's appreciation of the use of these aircraft. Arrangements are currently in hand to evaluate the use of these aircraft for routine overhead line patrol duties. The outstanding point, which came to light from the employment of these aircraft, is the need to use specialist crews, experienced in overhead line work".



*We are indebted to John for telling this tale from outside our area, which helped to encourage the SWEB Helicopter Team to expand and cover five regional electricity companies, which is still being operated today even after privatisation and the transition to Western Power Distribution. Ed.*