

Blind pilot's sight 'recovering'

A pilot who was guided in to land by the RAF after going suddenly blind at 5,500ft (1,676m) is starting to regain his sight, according to his son.

Jim O'Neill, from Marks Tey in Essex, was flying a Cessna from Glasgow to Colchester when he suffered a stroke.



An RAF plane was scrambled, and shepherded the 65-year-old to the RAF Linton-on-Ouse base in North Yorkshire.

His son Douglas said Mr O'Neill had begun to regain his sight in one eye and could be out of hospital in a week.

Mr O'Neill, who has 18 years' flying experience, was over RAF Leeming in Northallerton when he encountered difficulty and sent a mayday alert on 31st October.

Despite air traffic controllers' efforts, he was unable to land the plane at nearby Full Sutton Airfield near York and was directed to RAF Linton-on-Ouse.

Wing Cdr Paul Gerrard flew his Tucano T1 about 50m (164ft) from the Cessna to bring him safely down.

Mr O'Neill was checked over by RAF medics before being transferred to Queen's Hospital in Romford, Essex.

Douglas O'Neill said the RAF rescue was like a Hollywood film.

His son, Douglas O'Neill, said: "We heard from the hospital this afternoon that my dad is starting to get some sight back in one eye.

"It's now a matter of waiting to see if his sight returns."

"The doctors are saying that it may be weeks and that he may be allowed home within the next five or six days."

Jim suffered a stroke after developing a blood clot, but has not exhibited any other ill-effects.

Douglas said that his father wanted to travel to RAF Linton-on-Ouse to thank the crew members and controllers who saved his life.

Of the "miraculous" rescue, he said: "It's one of those things you might hear about happening in some sort of action film, but it's hard to believe what they did. They were just tremendous."

Mr O'Neill was flying the two-seater Cessna from Glasgow Airport to Colchester, after a family break in Scotland, when he lost his sight.

He landed on the eighth attempt.

He told journalists: "I should not be alive. I owe my life - and those of dozens of people I could have crash-landed on - to the RAF. It was a terrifying experience."