FAA Inspector Statement

July 13, 2009

Corky Smith
NTSB
Atlanta Federal Center Room 3M-25
60 Forsyth Street SW
Atlanta, Georgia, 30303

Dear Mr. Smith,

I was contacted by FAA Regional Communication Center and my supervisor on July 9, 2009, and was assigned to an accident that had occurred in the vicinity of Sanderson, Florida, where a Noles VANS RV7A, experimental amateur-built airplane, N774US collided with the ground resulting in structural damage to the airplane.

FAA Inspector Maitely Santiago (Operations) and FAA Inspector Robert Potts (Airworthiness) assisted me during this investigation. Both Inspectors were at the accident site.

I traveled to the accident site on July 9, 2009, however because of weather conditions and darkness I was unable to get to the site until July 10, 2009. The airplane is registered to and was operated by Vance L. Noles of Bradenton, Florida.

The airplane and pilot logbooks were not located by the pilot's family. The VANS RV7A is a two-place airplane with a tricycle fixed landing gear, serial number 72389, certificated on February 16, 2008. The aircraft registration was issued by the FAA on January 31, 2008. A Mattituck TMX 360, 180 horsepower engine powers the 1,800 pound gross weight airplane. The Hobbs meter was destroyed and the total engine and airframe hours could not be determined.

Review of SPAS information revealed the pilot held a private pilot certificate with ratings for airplane single engine land issued on September 2, 2004. The pilot's last flight review was not determined. The pilot held a third-class medical certificate issued on March 24, 2009. The pilot indicated on his last application for the third-class medical certificate that he had accumulated 665 total flight hours.

The pilot did not file a flight plan or receive a weather briefing before departing on a visual flight rules flight to McMinn County Airport (MMI, Athens, Tennessee). The pilot departed Wimauma Air Park (FD77), Wimauma, Florida at 0803. The flight was reported missing in the morning on July 9, 2009, and was located that afternoon by search and rescue personnel.

It was reported to me from Mr. Carroll Smith (NTSB investigator) that the owner of FD77 airport stated the pilot informed her the night before the accident that he would pick her up at MMI on July 8, 2009, and fly her back to FD77. When the pilot did not arrive at MMI she attempted to locate him by phone and through the FD77 airport manager. All attempts were unsuccessful. The airport owner stated she knew the weather was stormy along the pilot's route of flight and figured the pilot elected to land at an alternate airport, and was unable to contact her because he was out of cell phone coverage. When she could not locate the pilot on the morning of July 9, 2009, the authorities were notified of the missing airplane.

A witness who lives in the vicinity of the accident site stated he was outside in his back yard on July 8, 2009, and heard a small airplane located to the northeast of his home. The engine was at a very high rpm. He further stated the weather had been bad all morning with thunderstorms moving in and out of the area.

Examination of the crash site revealed the airplane collided with the ground in a nose down attitude, and came to rest on a heading of 240 degrees magnetic. The engine assembly was buried about 5 feet below the surface of the ground and was not attached to the engine mounts. One propeller blade was attached to the propeller hub assembly, the other blade was found separated. Both propeller blades had significant leading edge damage consistent with engine producing power. The engine cowling was completely destroyed.

The nose landing gear was destroyed. The left and right main landing gear was intact and attached to it's mounting point.

The cockpit area was totally destroyed. No information could be retrieved from the instrument panel, power quadrant or fuel selector valve. The pilot's seat belt and shoulder harness was used by the pilot. Continuity of the flight controls could not be determined due to the extent of damage received during the accident.

Both wings remained attached to the airframe and their leading edges exhibited accordion crushing. The left aileron was detached for the mount, however, it was located in close proximity to the left wing. The right aileron and flaps remained attached to their attachment points. The fuel tanks were not identified.

The empennage aft of the pilot's compartment was intact, but heavily damaged. The vertical fin and rudder were missing and not recovered. The tailcone (area wear the vertical stabilizer attached) was removed from the wreckage and sent to the NTSB Metallurgical laboratory for further analysis. The left and right horizontal stabilizers and elevators were damaged and remained attached.

The engine assembly and accessories received extensive damage (broken in three pieces and destroyed). No fuel, combustion, or electrical tests could be performed. Visual inspection of the components revealed no anomalies.

The wreckage was released to Higginbotham's Towing and Recovery Service, on July 10, 2009.

Steven Moore
FAA Aviation Safety Inspector