



Brian Suggs

12/29/2009 08:02 PM

To

cc

bcc

Subject John Lawrence Gilbert, Jr. Narrative.

History:

✉ This message has been forwarded.

Mr. Hargett:

I don't promise to be the best narrative writer but below is my stab at explaining all this.

I hope this helps with your investigation and if you have any further questions please feel free to call me anytime.

Brian Suggs

Written by Brian P. Suggs

I am a flight instructor and work with a few flight students at the Pell City, AL airport (KPLR) on a part time basis.

I met John Gilbert on 10/30/09. He approached me at the Pell City airport sometime around 1 pm that day and was inquiring about getting flying lessons and said had been told that either myself or Mickey Grills would be a good choice for an instructor. Mr. Grills was also present at this initial meeting but had something else to do at the time so I agreed to go on Mr. Gilbert's first flight.

We rented the Cessna 172 owned by JNM, Inc. that is used at Pell City for flight training and after a lengthy preflight flew for approximately an hour. The next day Mr. Gilbert called and wanted to fly again. He had a lot of questions. I met him at the airport and after spending some time talking about the cost of flying among many other things Mr. Gilbert said he had determined that it was in his best interest to buy his own airplane. I told him that there was a PA 28 Cherokee that was for sale and I suggested that he talk to the owner, Mickey Grills, and see if that was a possibility for him. Mr. Gilbert had made a firm decision that he didn't like the Cessna.

Mr. Grills began to fly with Mr. Gilbert in the PA 28 Cherokee and at that point I thought that they had made a deal on the airplane and that I was out of the mix except as a relief, but in the coming weeks Mr. Grills' schedule didn't allow him much time for a student so Mr. Gilbert called and asked me if I would fly with him. After clearing this with Mr. Grills I flew with him again beginning on or about 11/14/09.

On 11/16/09 I got a call from Mr. John Blum who has an airplane based at Pell City and was informed that he had been flying the day before with Mr. Gilbert in the PA 28 Cherokee. I had also flown with Mr. Gilbert on 11/15/09 on 2 occasions that day. I was informed that Mr. Gilbert

had told Mr. Blum that he had bought the airplane from Mr. Grills. I informed him that to my knowledge the transaction had not taken place as of that date. After a conversation with Mr. Grills we met Mr. Gilbert at the airport on 11/17/09 and Mr. Grills got the keys to the airplane from Mr. Gilbert. We both looked at his logbook and discovered that Mr. Gilbert had logged the flight taken with Mr. Blum as well as some other flights. We did not get a good explanation of the other logged flights. We told Mr. Gilbert that he would have to recreate his logbook and explained in great detail what he could and could not log. We felt that the examiner would have a big problem with that initial log book.

I flew with Mr. Gilbert on several more occasions and by now we were working on landings and emergency procedures. Mr. Gilbert had some bad habits and somewhat of a macho attitude at times that needed work and more evaluation so I purposely delayed his solo until I felt I could trust his judgement. He was spending a lot of time at the airport and was always ready to talk aviation and I felt like he was really beginning to do things by the book.

Mr. Gilbert's first solo was on 12/20/09. My policy is that after the first solo the student must fly again with me, solo again in the pattern, and go completely over the pre solo test and solo rules again before being signed off to fly on their own. After Mr. Gilbert's 2nd solo flight on 12/23/09, Mr. Grills was present and we both went over the pre solo test and the solo rules. Mr. Gilbert had closed on the airplane earlier in the day. I spent extra time going over the rules with Mr. Gilbert and Mr. Grills emphasized how important it was that the rules were followed. This conversation lasted more than 1 hour.

On 12/24/09 I had finished work for the day at about 11:30 and drove by the airport on my way home and saw Mr. Gilbert at the fuel farm with the PA 28 Cherokee. I called Mr. Gilbert and told him that the winds were pretty strong and that they were going to get worse as the day went on and that he needed to be through flying for the day. He agreed with me and said that he was going to put the airplane up. I spent the rest of the day with my family in Bibb County, AL and on my way home the wind was gusting pretty strong and it had started to drizzle, with overcast skies. I drove by the airport on my way home at about 8:30pm and noticed the wind sock sticking straight out and changing directions rapidly. Sometime between 9pm and 10:30pm it began to rain rather hard at my house which is not very far from the airport. The rain and wind were pretty rough. I could hear all this from my living room and saw the trees in my backyard swaying quite vigorously.

On 12/25/09 at 11:30am I received a call from my Civil Air Patrol Squadron Commander and was informed that we had a plane missing that took off from Pell City. 30 minutes later I was informed that it was a PA 28 Cherokee. I rushed to the airport to find Mr. Gilbert's hanger space empty and immediately knew who we would be looking for. After several telephone calls we mobilized a search that found Mr. Gilbert's airplane in Cleburne County. I was in the search plane.

On 12/26/09 I was at the FBO at Pell City where I was trying to gather as much information as I could such as AWOS data and fuel purchase data. I spoke with Mr. Gilbert's father at length and explained what I knew at the time. Mr. Gilbert, Sr. indicated to me that he was aware that Mr. Gilbert, Jr. had violated the rules and was not trained or authorized to fly in any condition that

existed the night before, i.e. night flights were prohibited while soloing, not to mention wind limitations, ceiling limitations and distance from the airport limitations. Mr. Gilbert Sr. indicated to me that he was aware that Mr. Gilbert, Jr. was a bit of a risk taker. In fact Mr. Gilbert, Sr. admitted that he had been flying with Mr. Gilbert, Jr. and didn't know he wasn't authorized to carry passengers. I'm assuming this flight was at night since no one saw this activity.

Later on 12/26/09 Mr. Hargett from the FAA had the FBO call me and ask for a meeting. I met Mr. Hargett at about 4:00pm and the narrative above is what I told him.

Since then I've had many people come forward to tell me about unauthorized flights and comments made by Mr. Gilbert. I had no idea that Mr. Gilbert had done any of this and it has become obvious to me that he had made a considerable effort to conceal this unauthorized activity from me and Mr. Grills. Once the airplane became the property of Mr. Gilbert his real intentions were no longer hidden.

Mr. Gilbert had not received any instrument training from me and was not capable of instrument flight. He had no knowledge of IFR flight rules. He had not had any cross country training at this point and was not capable of a cross country flight. He did have considerable cross wind landing training and had a very good feel for the airplane in the flair. He had a fair amount of night flying during his training, more than most. He did have considerable emergency training. Mr. Gilbert knew that he shouldn't be doing what he was doing without a doubt. He knew to listen to the AWOS before every flight and check the weather on the internet or with a briefer. We will probably never know what made him think he could complete this flight. Almost every indicator I can think of was completely ignored or disregarded.

I feel much sympathy for his family.

Dear David Hargett,

Concerning the crash of N1277t, I had flown with John Gilbert on several occasions as a fly instructor. John's skill level was that of a typical student pilot.

I sold him the airplane on December 23, 2009. He came by the hanger on the evening of December 23, 2009 and I gave him the log books. Brian Suggs and I then explained to him the requirements of his solo sing-off. That he was not allowed to fly at night, not allowed to fly someone, and he was not allowed to fly more than 25 miles from Pell City airport. He was not allowed to land at any other airports than Pell City of Talladega.

The last time I flew with him was the evening of December 22, 2009. We did a touch and go at Talladega, we did a short field take off at Pell City, and we did a soft field take off at Pell City. We did an engine failure to landing at Pell City. John did an excellent job that evening.

Sincerely,

Mickey Grills

