



MEMORANDUM FOR RECORD

Stephen Stein
Air Safety Investigator
National Transportation Safety Board
Office of Aviation Safety - Eastern Region

NTSB Accident Number: ERA15FA017
Aircraft Registration & Make/Model: N946DR; Aeronca 7AC
Accident Location: Cordele, Georgia
Accident Date: October 16, 2014

Note: The following record was documented from electronic mail by the Investigator –In-Charge (IIC), Stephen Stein.

Summary

Jerry Mehlhaff
Vice President of Engineering, American Champion Aircraft

Interview date and time: October 29, 2015; 0725 EDT

According to Mr. Mehlhaff, the rudder spring, also referred to as a "taxi spring", is not "really that strong" when compared to the application of human leg strength and air loads on the rudder. Removal of one of the rudder springs may result in discomfort, but would not inhibit the pilot from being able to land the airplane. Mr. Mehlhaff added, "especially with the amount of time [the pilot had] in that airplane."



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Interview #1 Summary

Anthony Sodano
Friend of Accident Pilot

Interview date and time: November 13, 2014; 1610 EDT

Interviewer was Stein.

According to Mr. Sodano, he flew with the accident pilot in the 24 hours that preceded that accident.

He remarked that in the months before the accident, the accident pilot had "excused himself from dinner because he had to go throw up." Mr. Sodano stated that the issue started about a year prior; a doctor diagnosed subsequently placed him on the medication "Nexium."



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Interview #1 Summary

Charles Kinberger
Friend of the Pilot

Interview date and time: October 20, 2014; 0937 EDT

Interviewer was Stein.

According to Mr. Kinberger, after refueling the accident pilot would normally remain in the pattern after departure in the event of an engine problem. At his home airport, Treasure Coast Airpark (FL37), Port St. Lucie, Florida, the pilot typically departed runway 09 and turned left downwind for runway 09 prior to heading north. Most of the airports they fly into are left hand traffic patterns, so he typically turned left after a runway departure. Even if the accident pilot was heading south and departing runway 09 at FL37, he would still fly the entire traffic pattern before proceeding south.

Mr. Kinberger stated that the accident pilot was a neighbor of his and they had known each other for about 9 years. They frequently flew together and had accumulated about 500 hours of flight time over the previous 8 years. They usually flew to nearby airports and had breakfast together.

Mr. Kinberger remarked that the accident pilot would always announce his position in the airport traffic pattern at uncontrolled airports – as a former air traffic controller he typically "overreports" his position.

The interviewee also recalled that the accident pilot was not a "panicky" person and that he would routinely practice emergency procedures. At one point he lost a cylinder in a J3 Cub; he continued flying in cruise and eventually landed the airplane successfully.

Interview #2 Summary

Charles Kinberger
Friend of the Pilot

Interview date and time: September 2, 2015; 1142 PDT

According to Mr. Kinberger, the accident pilot flew about 2 to 4 hours a week. To Mr. Kinberger's knowledge the accident pilot did not fly in formation, but he did practice aerobatics and was well versed in upset recovery and unusual attitudes. Mr. Kinberger would take his 180 horsepower Carbon Cub to breakfast with the accident pilot.

The witness stated that he doesn't believe the accident pilot would have entered a deliberate left turn to evade an airplane that was approaching from behind.



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Interview #1 Summary

Gary Lickle
Witness

Interview date: October 17, 2014

Interviewer was Stein.

Mr. Lickle reported that they had just finished refueling their airplanes and that "everyone was in a good mood" and none of the pilots in their group appeared sick or not fit to fly. The accident pilot, Rene St. Julien, took the "lead", John Stinson, Jr. was second, John Stinson Sr. was third, and Mr. Lickle was fourth. John Stinson, Jr. took off departed after the accident pilot and appeared to be "outclimbing" the accident airplane. The witness then observed John Stinson, Sr. begin his takeoff roll at which point the accident airplane began a left turn at about 300 feet above ground level. Mr. Lickle was confused by this action as they had planned to turn right and head north towards their destination airport. The turn became progressively steeper as the accident airplane continued left. After completed about a 180 degree turn, the airplane nosed into the ground from about 100 feet above ground level, spun around and came to rest on a westerly heading. The witness immediately radioed John Stinson, Sr. not to takeoff and fast taxied to the

wreckage. He observed that both occupants were "trapped" in the airplane and there was no movement. The accident pilot was located in the front seat, his body slumped over with his head down. After John Stinson, Sr. arrived they rocked the wings back and forth to pull them from the aircraft. They also turned the magnetos off and attempted to shut off the fuel, but they could not locate the shutoff valve.

Mr. Lickle was asked several follow-up questions; below are his summarized responses.

NTSB: Where were you when you witnessed the accident.

Mr. Lickle stated that he was at the runway 28 intersection.

NTSB: Was there any abrupt pitch or bank?

The witness reported there was no abrupt pitch or bank. He added that the pilot did not appear to be fighting the turn. The turn looked like a consistent left turn without any yaw.

NTSB: How long have you known the pilot?

Mr. Lickle stated that he had known the accident pilot for about 10 – 12 years. He remarked that the pilot never communicated any problems with N946DR. The wind at the time was straight down the runway about 10 knots with gusts to about 15 knots.

NTSB: Did you often fly together as a group?

The witness stated that they "fly a lot in trail like this" and that Rene has departed first many times.

NTSB: Did any of the departing airplanes in your group experience any issues after takeoff?

According to the witness, he flew home to Palm Beach today and "had no problems." John Stinson, Jr. departed after the accident airplane, flew for about 10 minutes and encountered no engine problems.

Interview #2 Summary

Gary Lickle
Witness

Interview date and time: October 18, 2014; 1207 EDT

Mr. Lickle stated that their group of four airplanes had originally planned to refuel at Cook County Airport (15J), Adel, Georgia, an airport located approximately 30 minutes south of Cordele, Georgia, but the fuel pumps were "down." Their destination after Crisp County Cordele

Airport (CKF), Cordele, Georgia was Peach State Airport (GA2), Williamson, Georgia. Mr. Lickle recalled that the rest of the group had entered the left base leg for runway 28 while the accident pilot entered the left downwind leg for runway 28 at a 45 degree angle. The accident pilot routinely talked about demonstrating a return landing to the airport in the event of an engine failure or fuel contamination.

Interview #3 Summary

Gary Lickle
Witness

Interview date and time: October 22, 2014; 1533 EDT

According to the witness, they didn't have a specific navigation plan for their flight; "whoever took the lead was the lead." Three airplanes in their group, including Mr. Lickle's, departed North Palm Beach County Airport, West Palm Beach, Florida. The accident pilot and another pilot in their group were already airborne and in separate airplanes. Since the accident pilot was flying the slowest airplane in the group, the rest of the flight was able to reach them while in cruise flight. The group did not discuss flying at a prescribed altitude or airspeed during their flight; the departure plan from CKF involved using their own instruments to navigate to GA2. As the accident pilot's airplane was the slowest in the group, they had all planned to follow him to GA2. During the flight they communicated over a common frequency, 123.47. Mr. Lickle had previously observed the accident pilot deviate from typical airport traffic pattern procedures.

Interview #4 Summary

Gary Lickle
Witness

Interview date and time: September 15, 2015; 1533 EDT

After all the airplanes converged in flight they initially flew to Umatilla Municipal Airport (X23), Umatilla, Florida prior to reaching CKF. According to the witness, the accident pilot had been the first in a group to depart in similar scenarios while at the helm of higher and lower power airplanes. He stated that the accident pilot is typically very vocal in the air and would not have hesitated to report an anomaly over the radio. Mr. Lickle could not recall anything that would startle the accident pilot in the cockpit. He reported that the accident pilot was "very big" on returning to airports after an engine failure and that they had practiced this maneuver together. In trying to understand the accident, two things did not make sense to the witness: 1) there was no abrupt change in altitude and 2) the left turn.

The accident pilot was notorious for flying the airport traffic pattern after refueling to be able to initiate a forced landing to the runway in the event of a fuel contamination incident. On the day

of the accident, although he refueled at X23, the accident pilot did not fly the traffic pattern after he departed the airport.

According to Mr. Lickle, they staggered their departures so they were a "safe distance" from each other during departures. He estimated they waited about 5 seconds each before departing. Mr. Lickle recalled that the second airplane was about 200 feet over the accident airplane and about a quarter of the full length of the runway behind it.



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Interview #1 Summary

Jan St. Julien

Wife of the Pilot and Surviving Passenger

Interview date and time: August 18, 2015; 1345 PDT

Interviewer was Stein.

Ms. St. Julien, the accident pilot's wife, stated that she did not remember any details about the days leading up to the accident or the accident itself.

According to the interviewee, her father purchased the airplane for her about 6 years before the accident. The pilot and she flew the airplane at least three times a week. The accident pilot had been flying since age 45 and did not suffer from high blood pressure or heart problems. She stated that her husband was diagnosed with acid reflux by a doctor at the VA and was prescribed medication. At the time the doctor told the accident pilot that he would only have to take the medication for a few months.

The pilot's wife recalled that sometimes food would not go make it all the way to his stomach, which would only happen about once a month. The acid reflux stopped once the accident pilot started taking medication.

Ms. St. Julien stated that she worked as a flight attendant for Southwest Airlines until March 2014 when she retired. She remarked that her husband was "medically well," "wasn't a drinker," and "never smoked in his life." The accident pilot exercised frequently; he frequently lifted weights, which he followed up with some form of cardio activity such as walking or swimming.

The accident pilot worked as an air traffic controller for Sikorsky Helicopters for about 35 years.

Ms. St. Julien stated that the accident pilot would usually fly the traffic pattern after refueling. She remarked that her husband would not initiate his crosswind turn until reaching the end of the runway. The accident airplane was equipped with a radio, which was operated by the front seat occupant. The rear seat occupant could use the radio to converse with the front seat occupant, but could not transmit over the radio.

Interview #2 Summary

Jan St. Julien

Wife of the Pilot and Surviving Passenger

Interview date and time: September 2, 2015; 1405 PDT

Ms. St. Julien recalled that she weighed about 148 lbs at the time of the accident.

The witness was also asked to describe the pilot's flying history. She stated that they flew together frequently during the week and usually to the beach or in the traffic pattern. Each weekend the accident pilot would fly with their neighbor. He "never" did any formation flying, but he did do some aerobatics in their Stearman.

Ms. St. Julien was also asked to describe any startling experiences she had in the airplane. She recalled one experience when they were returning from Okeechobee, Florida. While flying approximately 750 feet above ground level, an experimental RV airplane overtook them from below and then rapidly climbed to their altitude to pull in front of them. Ms. St. Julien stated that she did not react because she "realized Rene [the accident pilot] was still in control." They never invited the RV pilot over to their home after that incident.

According to Ms. St. Julien, the accident pilot flew approximately 5 hours per week from August to September. He would typically extract recorded data from his GPS to update his logbook.



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Interview #1 Summary

John Stinson, Jr.
Witness

Interview date and time: October 18, 2014; 1134 EDT

Interviewer was Stein.

Mr. Stinson reported that he knew the accident pilot for about 3 to 4 years and had flown with him about 4 to 5 times prior to the accident flight.

Interview #2 Summary

John Stinson, Jr.
Witness

Interview date and time: October 22, 2014; 1448 EDT

Mr. Stinson reported that there were no formal navigation or flight procedures for their group. They discussed their departure procedure while they were refueling at Crisp County Airport (CKF), Cordele, Georgia and decided to take off and head north out. They had no discussed a prescribed altitude and/or airspeed prior to departure. The accident pilot was flying the slowest airplane of the group, so they had been following him throughout the trip. They had been flying about 90 miles per hour (indicated airspeed) throughout most of the trip. During each leg they remained within visual contact with one another; each airplane was about one half mile apart.

Interview #3 Summary

John Stinson, Jr.
Witness

Interview date and time: September 2, 2015; 1032 EDT

Mr. Stinson reported that he taxied onto the departure runway and began his takeoff roll after the accident pilot rotated. He was flying N463LM, a CC 340, at the time of the accident and was taking it to an airshow to demonstrate it for a prospective buyer. The witness remarked that he was about 200 feet behind the accident airplane when it started to turn left. According to Mr. Stinson, the accident pilot made a radio call prior to departure, "red champ flight of four departing."

Mr. Stinson departed from North Palm Beach County General Aviation Airport (F45), West Palm Beach, Florida with a flight of two other airplanes. The accident pilot departed from his "home airport", Treasure Coast Airpark (FL37), Port St. Lucie, Florida. After the group converged, the accident pilot made all the radio calls to transition the group through different airspace. They refueled at Umatilla Municipal Airport (X23), Umatilla, Florida, and departed for Cook County Airport (15J), Adel, Georgia. The accident pilot was the first to land at 15J, noticed the fuel pumps were "down" and informed the group.



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Interview #1 Summary

John Stinson, Sr.
Witness

Interview date and time: October 23, 2014; 1443 EDT

Interviewer was Stein.

According to Mr. Stinson the group had planned to follow the accident pilot. The group did not discuss flying at a specific altitude or airspeed prior to departing on the trip. The pilot of each airplane used a GPS unit to navigate to each destination en route. The airplanes did not fly in formation, but they did maintain visual contact while flying about 2,500 – 5,000 feet apart from each other. Mr. Stinson stated that he knew the accident pilot for about 15 years and they were members of the same club, but he hadn't "really" flown with him. The destinations along their route of flight included: Umatilla, Florida; Adel, Georgia; Cordele, Georgia; and Williamson, Georgia, which was their final destination.



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Interview #1 Summary

Joseph Decaro
Witness

Interview date: October 17, 2014

Interviewer was Stein.

Mr. Decaro stated that he was a retired United States Air Force officer who flew a variety of helicopters including the H1, MH53, and the Bell 206. During the accident he was positioned behind the fuel pump close to the medivac and was watching the airplanes refuel. He recalled that the first two airplanes departed "like a two ship element" – took off in 200 foot increments. The second airplane had pontoons. The accident airplane looked like it was starting a crosswind turn, which progressed into a "nice gradual banking turn." Moments later the airplane's turn became progressively steeper until the airplane nosed into the ground. Mr. Decaro did not observe any abrupt changes in pitch or bank. And while the second airplane was the loudest, he did not hear a "pop" or "sputter" from the engine.

Interview #2 Summary

Joseph Decaro

Witness

Interview date and time: October 18, 2015; 1229 EDT

Mr. Decaro recalled that the airplane was about 100 – 200 feet above ground level; 300 feet "sounds high" based on his observations. The turn was gradual and smooth, but continued to get "steeper." He further remarked that the airplane did not appear to be very close to the trees at all and that he was higher than any obstacle in the area.