

## Aircraft Accident Witness Statement

Joseph N. Durda

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### Qualifications: ATP

USMC Aviator

US Navy Aviation Safety Officer School

Director of Safety and Standardization VMFA 314

Production Test Pilot: McDonnell Douglas

ALPA Aviation Accident Investigator School

Delta Air Lines Inc., 32 years (Retired)

### Statement:

On Sunday, Nov 17, 2019 at approximately 1230 local, I observed the accident aircraft, N5909V, taxiing on taxiway C toward runway 5. What made me take notice was the fact that there was an unusual amount of power being used relative to the taxi speed of the aircraft and the tail low attitude of the fuselage. Two things came to mind. The pilot was performing run-up procedures on taxi and that the aircraft was heavy. These 2 things were not totally out of the realm of normal, other than it was something I noticed.

Not necessarily in a hurry to leave the airport, I wanted to watch the aircraft depart. I relocated my vehicle to the SW tie-down area to observe the takeoff. I could still hear the higher RPM on the engine as he continued across runway 13-31. This sound faded as the distance from me increased. I could not hear any additional power sounds as the aircraft stopped short of runway 5. As I waited, the thought of hot brakes came to mind and I consciously thought of "what if" an

abort was required and if there would be enough brake available in the event it was high speed. This came to mind due to the fact that the winds were reported as 360/8 (obtained from AWOS on my handheld radio) and traffic was also using runway 31 which could present a potential traffic conflict.

In the next couple minutes I saw the aircraft moving from its stopped position and appeared to be approaching the runway but continued a left turn to what seemed to be heading back up taxiway E. I thought he was coming back for some reason. Several feet later the aircraft made another left turn and I changed my thought to say he was making a clearing turn to observe any traffic that might be in the pattern that was unannounced. Good idea I thought. During this maneuvering, I saw what I thought was sand blowing around as a result of the high power being utilized to make the turn. Note that I could not hear the engine at this distance, but that is what I was thinking. As the aircraft was approaching what I would say was the runway holding position markings, I observed more white color and immediately thought smoke. Almost at the same time the pilot announced on the CTAF frequency what I thought would be a pre-takeoff call, but heard him call his position at runway 5 and he had a problem and I believe he also said something about smoke. The aircraft was still moving and continued making a left turn to runway heading. His call was unanswered, not that he was calling anyone in particular, more of an advisory call. At that moment, I could see both the nose wheel and main gear and noticed an orange color on the right main gear. Again at almost the same time, he made another call on CTAF and stated, as much as I can recall, to Venice Unicom that he needed emergency assistance and that it didn't look good. By now the fire was obvious on the right gear. Unicom responded with a request for a repeat of the transmission and asked if someone needed assistance. Nothing further from the aircraft was heard. I did not see anyone evacuate the aircraft. In a very short amount of time I could see fire underneath the aircraft and appeared to now include the left main gear.

Now I was rapidly trying to think what I could do to help. As nothing further was transmitted, I called Venice Unicom on the radio and said there was an aircraft on fire at the approach end of runway 5 and to call for fire/rescue. She came back that they were on the phone to 911 at that time.

Venice airport is fortunate to have the Sarasota County Sheriff Office aviation operation on the field. I thought if anyone was there that they could back up the 911 call and offer additional support. I also had a thought to obtain my hangar fire extinguisher to help and immediately gave that up as a useless idea. As it was

Sunday there was no one was available at the sheriff hangar. I continued driving toward the airport entry gate thinking that I would drive 2 blocks down the street to a location where I know there was Venice Police directing traffic for a nearby festival. As I approached the gate, there was a police officer standing next to his vehicle in the administration building parking lot. I exited my vehicle and asked if knew about the fire. He said yes and asked if I knew where it was, to which I said yes. He then asked if I could lead him there. He followed me in the shortest direction toward runway 5. I motioned him around me as we approached the tie-down area. It was very obvious from that point where the aircraft was located.

As far as a timeline is concerned, I don't think 3-4 minutes had elapsed from the time I saw the initial indication of fire to this point. Additional police units were now arriving and I devoted the next 10-20 minutes aiding with directing police and fire/rescue vehicles toward the now totally engulfed aircraft.

  
Joseph N. Durda

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