

Witness Interview Summary
SEA06FA119

Witness:
Tom Webb



Personal Interview on 06/18/2006
Conducted by Georgia Struhsaker, NTSB, Seattle, WA

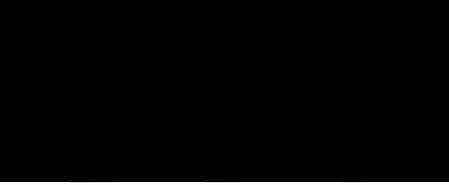
The pilot had been flying into the lodge for 9 years and was very familiar with the area. The pilot and his wife had flown to the lodge from their home in California the day before the accident. The pilot told him he had stopped and refueled the airplane in Medford, Oregon, located approximately 70 miles away, before flying into the lodge.

The purpose of the accident flight was to deliver 3 flats of strawberries that the pilot had brought with him from California to the staff at Half Moon Bar Lodge. Aboard the airplane for the flight were the pilot, his wife, and two other lodge guests, who the pilot had invited to go along for the planned flight to Half Moon Bar and return. There was no baggage aboard the airplane other than the 3 flats of strawberries. The pilot, Vern Miller, was in the left front seat. Guest Roberta Way was in the right front seat. The pilot's wife, Elizabeth Miller, was in the left rear seat. Guest Sharon Hanson was in the right rear seat.

At the Paradise Lodge airstrip, takeoffs and landings are made heading downstream. The lodge manager stated that he watched the airplane depart. Before takeoff, the pilot performed an engine run up, and the "engine was running strong." The takeoff was made downriver, and it was a "normal" takeoff.

Witness Interview Summary
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Witnesses:
William and Heather Benevente



Personal Interview on 06/18/2006
Conducted by Georgia Struhsaker, NTSB, Seattle, WA

They reported that the pilot had been into and out of the Half Moon Bar and Paradise Lodge airstrips "many times." At the Half Moon Bar Lodge airstrip, landings are made heading upstream and takeoffs are made heading downstream. Heather heard the airplane fly over heading downstream. She stated that it was the pilot's routine "hello be landing soon" fly over. She did not see the airplane as her little boy distracted her.

Two new employees, Nicolas Benevente and Samantha Kreg, reportedly saw the airplane fly over. They told William and Heather that they thought they saw the airplane hit a tree during the fly over, but they were not sure.

Note: Nicolas Benevente and Samantha Kreg were not at Half Moon Bar on June 18, 2006. The NTSB IIC, Georgia Struhsaker, made several attempts to contact them and get their statements without success.

Witness Interview Summary
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Witness:
Robert Lee
River Rafter
[REDACTED]


Telephone Interview on 06/18/2006
Conducted by Georgia Struhsaker, NTSB, Seattle, WA

He was part of a group of 12 people on 5 rafts. He had flown with the pilot, Vern Miller, several times a few years ago. He recognized the airplane as Vern's airplane. He had seen it the day before the accident flying the canyon at a "fairly low" altitude. At the time his group had stopped for the night at Half Moon Bar Lodge. It looked like the airplane was going into Paradise Lodge.

On the morning of the accident, they left Half Moon Bar Lodge and floated downriver. They were just above the impact site when he heard the plane coming downriver. It was hard for him to estimate the airplane's elevation, but it was "pretty low." The engine was running at "a high pitch" with no sputtering.

The airplane flew directly over them, over the river. When it got about 100 or 200 feet downriver, it banked to the left. It was a "real sharp bank" as if the pilot was turning back upstream. The airplane was "fairly vertical," with the left wingtip straight down and the right wingtip straight up. As the airplane got headed back up river, the left wing clipped a tree that was 3 or 4 rows up from the riverbank. About half of the left wing was severed, and the airplane twisted to the left. Its nose dived into the riverbank and flipped over onto its back. It ignited quickly within 20 to 30 seconds.

Witness Interview Summary
SEA06FA119

Witness:
David DeCoursey
River Rafter


Telephone Interview on 06/22/2006
Conducted by Georgia Struhsaker, NTSB, Seattle, WA

He was in the lead raft. There was a slight downriver breeze of 2 to 3 mph. The canyon was 300 to 400 feet deep. He heard the airplane before he saw it, and the airplane's engine "sounded like it was running absolutely fine."

The airplane flew past their position heading downstream on the right side (when facing downstream) of the canyon at an altitude of about 150 feet agl. The airplane entered a left turn and after completing 90 degrees of turn, the bank shallowed slightly, then steepened. After the bank steepened, the airplane "side slipped down a little." As the airplane completed 180 degrees of turn, it impacted a tree. The right wing, left wing strut and tail contacted the tree. The airplane then descended at a 45-degree angle, impacted the riverbank and caught fire.

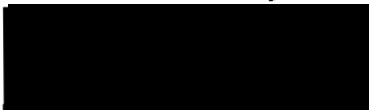
Statement of David R. DeCoursey
Cessna Plane Crash at Huggins Canyon
6-17-2006
Pilot: Vern Miller

6-22-2006

Our group put in from Half Moon Bar Lodge at about 9:00 AM June 17th, 2006 and proceeded down river. We were in Huggins Canyon, about ¼ of a mile below Half Moon. I was rowing the lead raft with Mike Peil as passenger. There was a down river breeze, not strong, I would estimate in the 2 to 3 mph range. The Canyon rises sharply on the right from the water up about 300 to 400 feet, on the left there is a 30 to 40 foot shelf of rock that is about 200 feet deep and from it the left side of the canyon then rises also to 300 to 400 feet. We heard the plane coming, flying down the canyon, it went past us at about 150 feet up the right side of the canyon, it went into a left bank thru 90 degrees, leveled a little and then went into a hard left turn, it is my belief that it was at this point that the pilot realized that speed, weight, the breeze and the narrowness of that point of the canyon were working against him. As the plane came around it side slipped lower and clipped the trees I believe that it clipped both the right wing left wing strut and tail and was then coming down at about a 45° angle heading towards the rock shelf with the river and one of the other rafts in our party in direct line. From this point my view was obscured by the rock shelf and I concentrated on getting in to shore as quickly as possible, I heard the impact followed in a second or two by the ignition of a fire ball as the fuel exploded. I was the second or third person on the scene, Dan Hughes being the first. I observed a gray haired lady with severe head trauma about 25 feet from the burning wreckage, Dan had pulled her away and checked her for vital signs, finding none. The plane had come down at enough of an angle so that the tail section was inverted, in front of what had been the cockpit. It was at that point that I became aware of a second body, completely engulfed in flame. I did not see either of the other two bodies. We were on scene for about 10 to 15 minutes, long enough for the fire to begin to subside. A kayak from a party who had also been at Half Moon then came into view and Steve Swearingen told him we needed him to go to the next lodge down river, Clay Hill Lodge, so that they could use their radio phone to alert the authorities. He immediately answered, "I'm there", and left the scene heading down river. We left shortly thereafter and made our way down river. We arrived at the take out point just as the Sheriff boat was arriving. Bob Lee left his contact information with the sheriff deputy along with a brief description of the events.

If I can be of further service please feel free to contact me:

David R. DeCoursey



Struhsaker Georgia

From: Steeves, Mitch L [REDACTED]
Sent: Friday, June 23, 2006 6:40 PM
To: Struhsaker Georgia
Subject: June 17th

Dear Ms. Struhsaker:

My name is Mitch Steeves. I live at [REDACTED] I can be reached by phone at [REDACTED] I am the State Manager for the First American offices in Oregon and Washington. I supervise 52 offices in 25 counties. These offices comprise about 650 employees.

As we discussed on the phone earlier today, I have agreed to give you a brief summary of my recollection of the events that unfolded last weekend.

As you know, a group of senior managers from First American Title left on a rafting trip last Thursday. After a day and a half of rafting, our group reached the Half Moon Lodge Friday afternoon.

Not long after we arrived at the Half Moon, I observed what I would describe as a maroon and tan single-engine plane as it entered the area near where I was relaxing. I had a very clear view of the plane at this time. I would describe the sight as follows: the plane was extremely loud and appeared very suddenly. From my vantage point, it appeared to enter below the tree line and turn abruptly to land at an adjoining lodge. I was amazed at the maneuver I witnessed and thought that it was quite a flying feat. My immediate assumption was that this was an experienced and talented pilot who knew the area well.

The next morning, we left the lodge and began our trip down river at about 8:30. We had been rafting about 30 minutes or so in an area where the river is pretty calm. Our raft was the lead raft of our group of 5 rafts. Dan Hughes was my "guide" and John Cozier was the other passenger. I was stretched out on our raft facing up river, backwards if you will, when I observed the same plane described above flying toward us. Once again, I was surprised at how loud the engine was-maybe that was a product of the environment I was in and the fact it was getting very close to us. The engine sounded throaty and strong both days and consistent throughout. I did not hear any miss in the throb of the engine. The plane flew down river and more or less directly over our trailing rafts. Our raft was some distance ahead. As the plane came over the river, it moved toward the tree line. The pilot executed a similar maneuver to what I saw the day before and appeared to be about to turn 180 degrees and head up river. This is what I saw from here: the plane moved into the tree line and began to make the sharp turn. Part of the plane, I would guess the right wing or maybe the tail, clipped a tree branch of one of the large fir trees directly across from our raft. I would guess this branch was about 2/3rds of the way up the tree. The branch was sheared off of the tree and I saw it fall toward the ground. I would have guessed this to be a 10 to 15 foot long piece of the branch. After the plane hit the branch, it was immediately evident the pilot was in deep trouble. The plane veered toward the rocks right in front of where we were on the water at what appeared to be a slightly angled line from our position and the tree. In a very surreal moment, the plane nose dived into the rocks, flipped on its back and, within less than a second, a puff sound indicated that it had ignited. It stopped not far from the edge of the rocks and was completely visible to me throughout the crash. You could immediately see flames and I could feel the heat from the fire in the water below.

In an act of what I consider great bravery, Dan immediately started rowing to shore. He had told me a story earlier in the morning of being on the river during a fire that engulfed the canyon last summer and his explanation and actions led me to believe he was in control of the circumstances. I was a little uncertain if he was trying to avoid debris that could fall on us (and did fall into the river) or if he thought the plane might explode and injure us. He had neither thought in mind. It was his intention to try to save the lives of those on board. He was to shore and starting up the slope within a matter of a minute or two. I followed Dan up the side while John held the boat so it would not take off down the river.

When I got to the top, Dan had already pulled one woman further away from the plane. She was lying face down on the rocks and appeared to have been partially thrown from the plane. I asked if she was alive and he said no, he checked for a pulse and there was none. More of our group was starting to come up from the upriver side of the rocks. Collectively as a group, we stood and silently stared at the scene for a matter of several minutes. As another raft came down the river, we sent them ahead to the next lodge to notify the sheriff and send the proper authorities.

I can't say how long we stayed there, but eventually, we decided there was nothing we could do and proceeded to our destination. As we traveled downstream, we encountered a few pieces of the plane floating in the river. It was an odd feeling to watch these sink into the water.

6/26/2006

Other than my conversation with you earlier, I have not communicated with any media or officials regarding this incident.

You are welcome to contact me at any time should you have further questions about my observations.

Mitch Steeves

Struhsaker Georgia

From: Mike Peil [REDACTED]
Sent: Monday, June 26, 2006 8:48 AM
To: Struhsaker Georgia
Subject: Fwd: Airplane crash June, 17th, 2006

>>> "Mike Peil" [REDACTED] 06/25/06 08:32PM >>>

The morning of 6-17-06, our rafting group left Half-Moon Lodge at approximately 9.00 AM. Approximately 15 minutes later we entered Huggins Canyon. My raft was the lead raft, furthest down river. I heard a small airplane coming down river. I looked up and saw a maroon and cream small plane. The plane appeared to be flying in the middle of the canyon. While watching the plane, it began to turn to the left and climb a little. It became obvious that the plane was going to have difficulty in making the turn.

The plane was flying with one wing pointed toward the ground. The plane had lost altitude and seemed to be slipping in the air. The plane's engine seemed to be running smoothly. While flying sideways, I believe the engine RPMs increased. My recollection is that the right wing, upper wing, hit a tree limb. This caused the plane to change direction and go towards the river.

The plane was coming down rapidly and was going to crash. I did not see the impact because my vision was blocked by a large boulder. I expected to see the plane bounce off the rocks into the river. I only saw small debris come off the rocks. Within seconds the plane burst into flame, sending a fire ball into the air along with black smoke.

I climbed up the rocks to get to the crash site. Several other members of our party that were up river had already got to the site. Dan Hughes stated that he had pulled one person from the wreckage and had checked for signs of life and found none. I noticed one person laying face down on the rocks and one person laying out of the plane face up. This person was engulfed by the flames.

Mike Peil

[REDACTED]

ROUGH DRAFT

[REDACTED]

Dear Georgia:

This e-mail is pursuant to your request on June 22, 2006, in which you requested a narrative of the plane accident that occurred on June 17, 2006. On Saturday morning, at approximately 9:00 a.m., our rafting group was heading downstream in Huggins Canyon. I was the second raft of a total of five rafts. The day was generally very clear and sunny. There was no noticeable wind that I detected.

I heard the sound of an aircraft approaching from the rear and turned around to observe a single engine high wing airplane coming down the canyon at an altitude of approximately 150 feet above the water level. I do not recall ever seeing a plane flying that low previously. As the plane flew over the top of our rafts, it started a gradual increase in altitude. It reached an altitude of approximately 250 feet above the water level when it made a very sharp turn to the left. At that point the canyon actually turns more to the right and I was quite surprised that the pilot chose to turn to the left towards the mountain ridge. The turn was quite radical and I believe the wing configuration was close to being vertical at the time of his turn.

He had proceeded in his turn so that the nose was headed almost straight back towards the river when he struck a tree on the mountainside. I heard a very loud and distinct snap of a branch, although I never observed any part of the airplane falling off at that point.

I remember thinking that this pilot was going to have trouble turning out of the turn and pulling up even, without hitting any object. However, once he struck the tree, I immediately felt that there was no hope. The plane slowed after striking the tree and headed sharply towards the ground. The plane impacted on the rocks and within a second or two, burst into flames. My raft was quite close to the point of impact and I was able to pull into shore. I then proceeded to climb up the embankment to the point of impact. The remains of the plane were still on fire and I observed what appeared to be a male body that was mostly consumed by the flames. I worked my way around a large rock and saw a body that was thrown out of the wreckage by approximately five feet. The body appeared to be very broken up by the impact and my first thought was that the person was deceased. I pulled the body approximately fifteen feet away from the wreckage and tried to feel for a pulse by her neck. I unfortunately was unable to detect any pulse. By that time, a number of the other rafters had arrived at the top of the cliff and we looked around the wreckage. However, we never observed any other bodies.

We notified a kayaker of the wreckage and told him to go down to Clayhill Lodge and call the sheriff's office. We left approximately 10 or 15 minutes after the accident and proceeded down river. When we reached Foster Bar and talked to some sheriff deputies, we were informed that there were in fact four parties in the plane.

At no time during the incident did I detect what I would consider to be mechanical problems with the engine of the aircraft.

This is a summary to the best of my knowledge on the incident that occurred in Huggins Canyon on June 17, 2006.

Very truly yours,

Daniel F. Hughes