Specialist's Report – Attachment 1

Interview Summary

AIR TRAFFIC CONTROL

DCA22MA009

Interviewee: Eddie Ratcliff, Controller in Charge/Air Traffic Manager
Representative: None

Date / Time: October 20, 2021 / 1400 to 1445 CDT
Location: Henriksen Jet Center, FBO at TME airport
Present: Betty Koschig
Investigator: Betty Koschig

During the interview Mr. Ratcliff stated the following:

He was employed as the Air Traffic Manager. He was qualified on all positions in the tower and qualified as a supervisor. His operating initials are ED. He started working at TME in June 2019. The contractor for the controllers was Advanced ATC, Inc. Prior to working at TME, he served in the United States Air Force, as an air traffic controller, from May 1999 to May 2019. He had been stationed at Moody Air Force Base (AFB), Maxwell AFB, Altus AFB and Scott AFB. He stated that he had a current medical certificate with no restrictions. He obtained an Associate of Airways Science degree from the Community College of the Air Force. His normal work schedule was Monday to Friday from 0600 to 1400 CDT. He worked his normal schedule the day of the accident, October 19,2021.

TME had a total of five controllers. Staffing for the tower was one controller. That one controller worked local control, ground control, and the supervisor positions combined at the local control position. At the time of the accident, he was the only controller in the tower.

Mr. Ratcliff was asked to provide his recollection of the events leading up to the accident, and until the time he left the tower.

Mr. Ratcliff stated that the pilot requested to taxi, and he responded by taxing the airplane to the runway. He was also talking to three other aircraft at that time; one was on approach, one was in the closed pattern, and the other was a transitioning helicopter. He stated the traffic level was nothing complex, normal stuff, slow ops. When the pilot of N987AK informed Mr. Ratcliff that he was ready to depart, Mr. Ratcliff called Houston approach control and requested a release for N987AK. After receiving the release, he cleared N987AK for takeoff from runway 36. At that time nothing appeared out of the ordinary; it was a normal operation.

Mr. Ratcliff stated that when he cleared N987AK for takeoff, he saw the airplane taxied onto the runway, and everything appeared fine. As N987AK was on his takeoff roll, he noticed the airplane go past taxiway tango, and as he continued to watch the airplane, he thought to himself that "this is not how things are supposed to go". He could not tell what had happened, but around the last 2,000 feet of the runway, he

saw the airplane jerk, and thought that maybe the pilot hit his brakes. Then he lost sight of the airplane as it went behind the trees. Then he saw the explosion.

Mr. Ratcliff stated that he thought N987AK would rotate right around or just after passing taxiway tango. He saw what appeared to be either the airplane attempting to lift, or something shifted in the airplane around the last 2,000 feet of the runway; then the airplane went off the runway and through the trees.

When asked had he controlled this airplane before, Mr. Ratcliff said he had, but did not recall when that was because that airplane did not depart very often.

When asked if they had a lot of larger airplanes fly into TME, he said not too often but they do get the big airplanes occasionally. However, since he did not work all the time maybe some fly in during the times that he was not at work. He said that they get all kinds of airplanes, but that was one of the larger ones.

When asked at what point on the runway would he expect the airplane to rotate off the runway, he said he had no expectation, there was no particular spot. He stated as N987AK traveled toward the end of the runway, he had a gut feeling about it and was hoping it would rotate. In the past, he had seen several airplanes get to the end of the runway and then rotate, but not that one [N987AK]. He thought it would rotate but it did not. He commented that he was happy that it was him up in the control tower and not one of the other controllers.

When asked what actions he took after he lost sight of N987AK, he responded that he called the FBO[1] and 911 immediately. He then informed Houston approach control about the accident, suspended runway operations, and sterilized the airspace. He sent away the airplane that had been working in the pattern; he thought that pilot said he was going to Sarasota. After that nothing else landed or departed. Then he called management of the ATC company and advised them what had happened, then continued to make multiple calls and provide information; he had been busy coordinating the accident. After that, one controller came up in the tower to relieve him. He had coordinated everything and gave her a briefing.

When asked if he would be preparing the accident package, he said yes, and that he was working with someone from FAA Safety.

When asked if there was anything that he thought appeared odd prior to the accident, he said that everything appeared fine. He said after controlling traffic for 20 years, you always get that feeling when something old departs, that something might break. He did not observe anything odd; he just knew it was an old airplane.

[1] Fixed Based Operator (FBO) at TME was Henriksen Jet Center.

When asked if they had ARFF[2] on the airport, he said they did not have an attached ARFF on the TME airport. When asked how soon after the accident did he observe emergency responders arriving at the accident site, he said soon afterward, less than about 5 minutes.

He commented that the N987AK never left the ground; and the pilot never spoke to any other ATC facility.

When asked if he saw any part of the airplane make a movement that was odd, he responded that the only thing that caught his eye was smoke from the tires. He did not know whether the airplane was trying to stop, or if it was just rotating. After that the airplane was in the trees, it happened so fast.

He commented that it was good they were on runway 36, if it had been on runway 18 the airplane would have hit the factory , as well as go over the highway.

When asked if there was anything that he could add that would help to understand the accident sequence, he said the pilot sounded calm, the taxi out to the runway was nice and smooth, no hesitation, nothing changed; the pilot never once keyed up to make him think that he could not depart. Everything was perfectly normal. There was nothing to give him pause. He had been doing this job for a long time and nothing, in hindsight, gave him any indication that anything was wrong.

When asked what source they use to get the wind, he said they have a monitor hooked up to wind senor on field. That information comes off the AWOS[3]. He explained that they recorded the ATIS[4] manually, but they switch it to "automated" when the tower was closed.

When asked if he recalled the weather observation at the time of the accident, specifically if he recalled the wind, Mr. Ratcliff said it was not windy at all, about 6 knots. It was a clear sky, no mist, no fog, visibility was good. Wind had been fairly calm most of the day, it had been fluctuating from 3 to 6 knot; not much wind at all.

When asked if he could think of anything else that would be helpful in this investigation, he said he could not think of anything else that would be helpful.

Interview ended at 1445.

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[2] Aircraft rescue and firefighting (ARFF) is a type of firefighting that involves the emergency response, mitigation, evacuation, and rescue of passengers and crew of aircraft involved in aviation accidents and incidents.

[3] Automated Weather Observing System (AWOS) generally report observations at 20-minute intervals and do not report special observations for rapidly changing weather conditions.

[4] Automatic terminal information service (ATIS) provides advance noncontrol airport/terminal area and meteorological information to pilots.

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