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Aviation Safety - Eastern Region (AS-ERA)

Date: August 8, 2023
Subject: ERA23LA307 Interview with Lidar Operator
Contact: Mr. Adrian Sotropa

The following is a record of conversation with Mr. Adrian Sotropa. Mr. Sotropa was interviewed by phone on August 8, 2023, at 1225 EDT. He was called at [REDACTED] and provided an e-mail address of [REDACTED].

At the beginning of the interview, he was advised that the NTSB is a federal agency mandated by Congress to investigate aircraft accidents, and NTSB has no authority to take any action against any individual. He was also informed that the purpose of an NTSB investigation is for safety only. He agreed to the interview and stated that some company representatives from GeoDigital were present with him. He was advised that for transparency I would be typing the notes and would send to him for review and comment.

Mr. Sotropa stated that they started collecting data on the second power transmission line after the first line they started was "cut off" due to weather. They engaged with the other line, and they were collecting data. Before this, there had been several times since their departure when the helicopter was flying too low. He stated that their altitude range was 400-500 ft above ground level (agl) to collect appropriate imagery. Mr. Sotropa stated that Mr. Reid was the second pilot that he had flown with, and that he flew "differently" than the previous pilot. "He was flying low," and Mr. Sotropa had told him a few times to "move up." He stated that the helicopter had descended to or below 290 ft a few times, and he's day, "We gotta move up." Mr. Reid would then climb back to their normal range. A few minutes before the accident, they flew over a ridge with a large power transmission tower on it and they were flying low, and Mr. Sotropa saw that they were very close to the tower and although it made him nervous,

he did not say anything. The helicopter came over the top of the ridge and descended the other side and they continued to "work the line."

Mr. Sotropa stated that several minutes passed, maybe even 5-10 minutes, and there was a hill in front of them, and he saw 290 ft again and said, "We are too low, we need to come up again," to which Mr. Reid responded, "Sure." A few seconds later, the altitude showed 210 ft, then 190 ft, and it was decreasing rapidly. He said, "We're flying low, we should go back up!" but at the same time, Mr. Reid said, "Hold on! We're going down." Mr. Sotropa said that he did not feel any "push" or tailwind or vibrations before this happened. The helicopter spun clockwise yet avoided the power lines. They impacted the ground and bounced/rolled, and he was knocked out momentarily. He felt like he could not breathe, and his seatbelt came unlatched during the accident sequence.

I asked Mr. Sotropa who to contact to obtain flight data that showed altitude and airspeed, and he responded that I could request this from [REDACTED] or [REDACTED], who process the data. [REDACTED], their HR person, [REDACTED], could get me their contact information.

I asked him if he had any further information to add, and he responded that the pilots, in general, struggle with the having sufficient engine power when the helicopter is filled with fuel and equipment. "It's not the best machine when you want to pull up . . . it doesn't give you power." He stated that a lot of the pilots talk about this.

Jason Hawes, an employee for GeoDigital, stated that if there was a tailwind, the equipment will show a tailwind very well because it shows an increase in groundspeed (if data was being logged at the time of the accident.) The equipment is very banged up. He added that he had flown with Mr. Reid about 2.5 months before this accident, and he did not have altitude issues that caused him alarm, but they were not operating over valleys and hills. They would break off if they were not getting enough lift. Mr. Sotropa stated that this happened on his flight too, a couple times, and it had happened the day before. If he felt there was not enough power to climb, he would break off and come around again at a higher altitude.

The call ended at 1257 EDT.

The digest was e-mailed to him for review on August 8, 2023. He replied on August 9, 2023, at 1005 EDT with comments that were incorporated into the narrative. The corrected digest was e-mailed to him on August 9, 2023.