



Memorandum of Record

Dan Baker
Senior Air Safety Investigator
Central Region

Date: 10/28/2019
Subject: CEN19LA308, FAA Field Notes

The following notes were extracted from field notes provided by FAA Inspector Robert Holdridge, Grand Rapids FSDO.

NARRATIVE:

On September 9, 2019 at approximately 1230, Inspector Robert Holdridge of the Grand Rapids Flight Standards District Office received a phone call from Steve Bono at the Regional Operations Center (ROC) to advise an aircraft accident occurred at 1142 in Whitehall, MI. The aircraft was initially incorrectly identified as a Taylorcraft BC12. The Whitehall police chief, Roger Squires stated the aircraft had hit a water tower in the city of Whitehall at the intersection of Sophia and Warner Streets.

The pilot was identified as James Joseph Laird, age 79, from his drivers license located in his wallet. Chief Squires stated the body was still in the wreckage. Chief Squires stated to remove the body they would need to significantly disturb the wreckage. Inspector Holdridge requested they not removed the body until the FAA Inspectors arrived.

Inspectors Holdridge and Matthew Livingstone arrived at the scene at approximately 1410. It was noted the aircraft was of metal construction and there had been a fire. The empennage was not burned and the external data plate indicated the aircraft was a Cessna 150M, serial number 15078440. The registration number is N9492U, which is registered to the deceased pilot.

Information from the police chief and fire chief indicate the aircraft had departed Fremont Municipal Airport approximately 45 minutes before the accident. Inspector Livingstone contacted the airport manager at Fremont and confirmed the aircraft departed in the late morning, but could not give an exact time.

Witnesses reported the aircraft was flying low in a straight line with the engine running until it crashed into the water tower and caught fire.

The single pedestal water tower is 180 feet in height and holds 500,000 gallons. The water tower shows impact damage in about the center of the spherical tank between the letters 'w' and 'h'. The impact point is clearly defined as a dent in the tank. There is deformation (rippling) noted on the panels of the tank containing the letters 'w' and 'hi' that is consistent with the damage noted on the leading edge of the wings. Damage to the aircraft and the water tower is consistent with the aircraft hitting the water tower perpendicular to the spherical tank.

Information received from CAMI shows the pilot's medical certificate expired on 11/30/2000. The aircraft does not meet the definition to be operated as a Light-Sport aircraft.

PILOT:

James Joseph Laird

[REDACTED]

Twin Lake, MI 49457

Date of Birth: [REDACTED] (age 79 years)

Private Pilot Certificate [REDACTED], Airplane - Single engine land rating

Last Third class medical was 11/04/1998. This information was verified with the Civil Aerospace Medical Institute (CAMI). They stated the Medical Certificate expired for all classes on 11/30/2000. Airman would NOT have been eligible for BasicMed and he had not applied for it.

AIRCRAFT:

N9492U, 1976 Cessna 150M, serial number 15078440

Registered to James J. Laird, [REDACTED], Twin Lake, MI 49457

The aircraft was destroyed by impact with the water tower and subsequent fire. The impact was on an approximate heading of 225°. The aircraft wreckage was aligned on an approximately 260° heading. The aircraft wreckage was mostly contained to 15' diameter area in the northeast corner of the fenced lot containing the water tower. Miscellaneous debris consisting of a nose and main landing gear tire, and small pieces of metal, plastic, and windshield was located within a 130' radius of the main wreckage.

Fuselage:

The cabin area of the fuselage was destroyed by fire. The interior was consumed by fire and the aluminum structure was melted. The instrument panel was destroyed by fire. The pilot was located in the left seat of the aircraft. Upon removal of his remains, it was noted the seat belt was located between his body and the seat cushion and was not fastened.

Wings:

The right and left wings were mostly separated from the fuselage and fuselage carry-through structure. The wing leading edges exhibited crushing damage, consistent with impact to the water tower. The wings exhibited fire damage to the skin, structure, and fuel tanks. The right wing came to rest on a chain link fence and the fire had caused the wing to deform from the heat.

Empennage:

The empennage was separated from the tailcone at the 173.41 bulkhead. The empennage sustained impact damage, but was mostly intact. The left horizontal stabilizer exhibited impact damage that appears to be from hitting the tree after striking the water tower.

Flight Controls:

The left and right ailerons were attached to the wings. The carry-through cable was intact and continuity was established between ailerons. The direct control cables were intact in the wing and continuity was established from the ailerons to the cabin. Due to impact and fire damage to the cabin, it was unable to be determined if the cables were connected to the control yoke.

The rudder remained attached to the vertical stabilizer. The rudder cables were intact from the rudder through the tailcone assembly. Due to impact and fire damage to the cabin, it was unable to be determined if the rudder cables were connected to the rudder pedals.

The elevators remained attached to the vertical stabilizer and suffered impact damage and deformation. One elevator cable was intact from the elevator through the tailcone assembly. The other cable exhibited overload fraying due to the empennage separating from the tailcone. Due to impact and fire damage to the cabin, it was unable to be determined if the elevator cables were connected to the control yoke.

The elevator trim cables were intact from the elevator trim tab through the 173.41 bulkhead. The cables exhibited overload fraying due to the empennage separating from the tailcone. Due to impact and fire damage to the cabin, it was unable to be determined if the elevator trim cables were connected to the trim wheel.

Flaps were attached to the wings and in the retracted position. The flap cables were intact and continuity was established between the flaps.

Engine: The engine sustained impact damage and fire damage. The engine was located under the pilot's body and debris from the fuselage fire. The engine was fragmented from the impact. The engine crankcase was fractured and cylinders were broke free from the crankcase. The crankshaft was fractured, with a part of it still attached to the propeller.

Propeller: The propeller was separated from the engine and came to rest under the horizontal and vertical stabilizer. It sustained damage from the impact to the water tower. The spinner assembly was flattened and deformed into the propeller hub from the impact with the water tower and a circular flattening was observed. The propeller mounting bolts were sheared and exhibited bending.

One blade was bent aft at the tip, bent mid-span, and had chordwise scratching. The opposite blade was bent aft near the blade root and had chordwise scratching. The blades exhibited a slight twist.

WEATHER:

Muskegon County Airport (MKG) is located approximately 15 NM south of the accident scene on a 161° heading.

METAR for MKG at 1555Z (1155 local) was temperature 64°, dew point 52°, winds 100° at 08 KTS, scattered clouds at 3500', overcast at 6500', 10 mile visibility.

Fremont Municipal Airport (FFX) is located approximately 15 NM east on an 81° heading

- METAR for FFX at 1456Z (1056 local) was temperature 57°, dew point 48°, winds 110° at 08 KTS, overcast at 1800' (Marginal VMC), 10 mile visibility.
- METAR for FFX at 1558Z (1158 local) was temperature 56°, dew point 51°, winds 100° at 08 KTS, broken clouds at 1000', overcast at 1800' (Marginal VMC), 10 mile visibility.

WITNESSES

Lois Jackel, [REDACTED] Whitehall, MI 49461

Ms. Jackel stated the aircraft approached very low from the north – northeast and sounded at full throttle. She stated the noise caused her to look up and watched the aircraft fly in to the water tower. She stated the engine never sputtered and never saw the plane tilt from side to side before impact. She said the weather was clear and no wind [REDACTED]

Jeremy Watts, unknown contact. Mr. Watts gave an interview on WZZM-TV

(<https://www.wzzm13.com/article/news/police-responding-to-incident-whitehall-schools-athletic-fields/69-429688f0-2fe0-4163-949a-7f6bcfdfb9db>)

Mr. Watts stated in the interview he was working across the street from the water tower. He heard the airplane and it sounded like a normal airplane but louder because it was so low to the ground. He stated he watched it impact the water tower.

ON-SCENE PERSONNEL:

Chief Roger D. Squiers
City of Whitehall Police Department
[REDACTED]

Chief Greg Holman
White Lake Fire Authority
[REDACTED]

Brad Walters
Medical Examiner Investigator
Muskegon County Medical Examiner's Office
[REDACTED]