



Lynn Spencer
Air Safety Investigator
Aviation Safety / Eastern Region

Date: September 25, 2023
Subject: ERA23LA374 Record of Conversation
Contact: Bradley Fitchett, pilot

The following is a record of conversation with Mr. Bradley Fitchett. Mr. Fitchett was contacted by phone on September 25, 2023, at 1027 EDT. He was called at [REDACTED] and provided an e-mail address of [REDACTED]. He did not have time to talk further and requested to call me back. He returned my call at 1044.

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, and any person NTSB talks with has the right to representation; he agreed to the interview without representation.

At this stage of the conversation, he was advised that for transparency I would be typing the notes and would send to him for review and comment.

Mr. Fitchett is an experienced commercial agricultural aerial applicator with more than 360 successful landings in the past 90 days, over 500 hours of flight time in this calendar year, and 4395 hours of flight time in a tail wheel aircraft. He stated that he is baffled about how the airplane got away from him so quickly, because he has thousands of landings in a tailwheel airplane (Cessna 188 and 180). Also, he had cleanly (and easily) landed this specific airplane two times previously that day. He stated, "It could have been pilot error, as maybe I could have let it roll out..."

Brad stated that though he has a great deal of experience in Cessnas, he does not have experience of how this specific aircraft typically responds under a variety of conditions, nor how minor adjustments may impact its performance. The plane is an antique (1951) military aircraft with custom modifications and refurbishments that few people would ever have the opportunity to pilot in either its original, or modified, form.

During the previous flights, he noticed that the brakes were hyper responsive with tight tolerances, there was a shudder when braking, and that the pedals were small. At the time of the crash, he believed he made a slight braking correction for a quartering tailwind, but the brakes seemed to keep braking even after he stopped applying the pedal. This made him call into question if the correct brakes, pads, and rotors were on the airplane. "They [brakes] were just so sticky," he said. "I even told my wife on the phone just after the accident that one of the brakes seized up, because that's what it felt like. It all happened so fast." He stated that in all the other similar aircraft he has flown, he has never experienced this type of braking response, even with fresh brake pads installed.

He also stated that he did not realize that the runway was grooved, and that may have had an extra gripping effect on the wheels that he didn't expect.

"Maybe it was the perfect storm that got me," meaning there were several factors that could have come together to cause the plane to flip quite abruptly and violently. "It is difficult to tell at this point what exactly caused the accident. Until I touched down, everything felt easy and right, like a hundred other landings before... then: wham! I was flipped over."

Since the accident, he learned from other pilots that these airplanes have a propensity for touchy brakes, and a forward center of gravity which gives them a tendency to flip forward. In hindsight, he wished he had taken the time to speak to other Cessna Birdog owners before flying the specialty aircraft. Brad stated that through this experience, he learned a few seemingly small things that he would have done differently, any of which **might** have added a layer of prevention in this instance and could potentially save his life in the future.

[Even though we did not deeply discuss the trim tab wheel's location and action in the conversation, Brad sent a supplemental email indicating that the trim tab wheel assembly being covered by paneling, rendering it not as readily available as it should have been, may have been a factor in the accident.]

I agreed to have the FAA look at the brakes and rotors to see if the appropriate brakes had been installed and inspected.

The call ended at 1059 EDT.

The digest was e-mailed to him for review on September 25, 2023. He replied on September 29, 2023, with additional information added to the narrative. The corrected digest was e-mailed to him on October 12, 2023.

Accident N5269G

Pilots Interview—2nd Interview

September 21, 2023, 1100hrs

Interview Participates:

- Bradley Fitchett; Pilot
- Michael Mantione FAA ASI

During our follow-up conversation on September 21, 2023, concerning the pilot's check ride and flight hours, the pilot initiated a discussion regarding the accident. He openly acknowledged his unfamiliarity with the aircraft, expressing regret that he hadn't conducted more extensive research on operating a Cessna 305A. He mentioned that he should have sought advice from experienced Cessna 305A pilots. Furthermore, he pointed out specific distinctions in the flap controls and the sensitivity of the brakes. Additionally, he admitted that all his prior flying experience had been with a Cessna 188, emphasizing that he had underestimated the significant differences between the two aircraft models.

I confidently affirm that the information presented in this interview is accurate as it was provided to me.

Accident N5269G

Pilots Interview

September 18, 2023, 1100hrs

Zoom Call interview:

- Bradley Fitchett; Pilot
- Michael Mantione FAA ASI
- Brent Gilman FAA ASI
- Paul Petrella FLM

Background:

- Aircraft N5269G, 1951 Cessna 305A.
- Purchased September 11, 2023, by Eric Brachtenbach.
- Annual Inspection completed February 22, 2023.
- Aircraft was not insured.
- Pilot of the aircraft was Bradley Fitchett.
- Departed from 81B Oxford County Regional Airport, Maine September 13, 2023.
- Refueled at KURT Rutland Southern Vermont Regional Airport.
- Accident occurred on landing at N03 Courtland County, Chase Field NY.
- Intended Final destination KHLC Hill City Municipal Airport.

Before this interview, Mr. Fitchett received a digital copy of the Pilot's Bill of Rights via email.

This interview was conducted via Zoom with Bradley Fitchett, the pilot of the aircraft mentioned earlier. Mr. Fitchett proved to be both affable and cooperative throughout the interview.

During the conversation, Mr. Fitchett shared insights into his aviation background, revealing that he operates his own crop-dusting enterprise as an Ag Pilot. His extensive aviation career spans more than 5000 flight hours, predominantly focused on flying tail-dragging airplanes, accumulating over 4000 hours of experience in this category. Notably, he has logged more than 500 hours of flight time within the current year.

Furthermore, Mr. Fitchett disclosed that he personally owns a Cessna 188, which is a low-wing taildragger. He highlighted his extensive experience navigating various airports under diverse weather conditions. However, it's important to note that Mr. Fitchett clarified that he lacks experience in flying the Cessna 305A, as it belongs to the high-wing tail-dragger category.

Mr. Fitchett, a friend of the aircraft owner Eric Brachtenbach, was entrusted with the task of piloting the airplane from Maine to Kansas at Mr. Brachtenbach's request. Before the flight, Mr. Fitchett conducted a preflight inspection, during which he observed no issues or discrepancies, and he also consulted with the maintenance personnel at the airport to gather some background information about the aircraft. They assured him that the airplane was in good operational condition. Mr. Fitchett did take notice of the seemingly new and thick brake pads. Upon performing the run-up, taxiing and roll out, he observed that

the brakes exhibited a "grabby" behavior accompanied by some shuddering. His initial assumption was that this might be attributed to the aircraft's prolonged period of inactivity.

Mr. Fitchett made a scheduled stop at KURT for refueling, and he reported that there were no brake issues. He mentioned that he used the brakes sparingly during both landing and rollout. Additionally, he noted that he was well-rested and considered this trip a leisurely one. When asked about his choice of footwear, he explained that he was wearing comfortable shoes that he had previously flown in without any problems. Mr. Fitchett also observed that the cylinder head gauge was running hotter than usual and that he had adjusted the mixture to a very lean setting.

As Mr. Fitchett approached N03 Cortland County, Chase Field in New York, he indicated he possibly encountered turbulence when flying over a tree line. According to Foreflight weather data, the wind was reported at 6 knots, blowing from the northwest, with potential gusts. Mr. Fitchett mentioned the possibility of a tailwind as well. He set the flaps between 10 and 20 degrees, and he used Runway 624 for landing, which has a length of 1200 feet. There were no reported issues during the approach or landing, with touchdown occurring within 350 to 400 feet of the runway threshold. Unfortunately, the accident took place approximately 500 feet down the runway.

During the rollout phase, Mr. Fitchett estimated his groundspeed to be between 30 and 40 knots. The aircraft veered slightly to the right, prompting Mr. Fitchett to use the left pedal for correction. At this point, events escalated rapidly, and Mr. Fitchett remarked that it felt as though the brakes were engaged. He made several noteworthy comments, including the fact that N03's runway was grooved, a feature he had not encountered previously, and that the pedal response in this aircraft differed from that of the Cessna 188 he was accustomed to flying. Despite the unexpected turn of events, he did not hear or feel any signs of skidding on the runway. Notably, there were four sets of skid marks on the runway, making it impossible to definitively confirm whether any of them belonged to N5269G.

During this time, Mr. Fitchett was utilizing the Foreflight app on his iPad, which was secured to a kneeboard. Additionally, he had his phone with him and had used it to check the weather conditions prior to his approach to Cortland.

The plane unexpectedly flipped, ultimately coming to rest upside down roughly 500 feet along the runway.

Mr. Fitchett furnished me with a copy of his certification, medical documentation, the aircraft's Bill of Sale, registration paper, and a photocopy of the Pilot's Operating Handbook he utilized during this flight.

I confidently affirm that the information presented in this interview is accurate as it was provided to me.