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Eastern

Date: February 21, 2025 @ 1500

Subject: Flight Instructor Interview follow up

Contact: CFII: Aaron Atkins, [REDACTED] and [REDACTED]

Prior to the scheduled meeting, the NTSB IIC (McCarter) sent an email to the instructor (Atkins) with several questions to think about prior to the call. The questions were the following.

1. Professional opinion of Ms. Blalock.
2. The pilots flying abilities.
3. The pilot's situational awareness.
4. The pilots use of technology versus her traditional stick and rudder skills.
5. The pilot's knowledge and use of airplane systems, specifically the auto pilot and other avionics.
6. Anything else you wish to add.

He was no longer her instructor at the time of the accident. He had been hired by an airline and had starting class prior to the accident. He was the pilots instrument instructor and flew with the pilot for a while and has some insight into her skills and abilities.

The pilot was very super nice lady. She seemed like she had a passion for aviation. Always nice and respectful. Respectful of others. She was cost conscious.

Regarding her flying abilities. It took her quite some time to get her private pilot's license. She struggled with communications. A previous instructor informed him that she struggled with the radios, and it was one reason why it took her so long to get her private. It took over 180 hours to get her private.

Sometimes, based on pilot workload, he would take over the radios so she could focus on the flying.

She struggled more than others. Her decision making inside and outside of the cockpit "was something." For instance, her buying a Cherokee first, then very quickly buying a complex high performance airplane instead of taking her time and learning how to really fly before jumping into something complex; she needed a chance to gain more knowledge and experience.

He had heard from previous instructors that she had a hard landing in the Cherokee and damaged the nose gear. Then she went out and purchased the Debonair. "It's a lot of plane." for a novice. He believed it was too much plane for her, or at least too much plane to start with.

When he began instructing the pilot, she already had her private pilot license at this point. She struggled with radio and communication. Her situational awareness was ok, maybe average. Briefly discussed the pilot's social media videos and were careful not to hypothesize based on past videos as they were edited for content and the accident flight was not posted online.

Regarding her Autopilot (AP) usage. A lot of times, she would rely on her iPad more than the Garmin; the one that is sending the GPS into the AP. She would "lean on" her iPad much more than the certified airplane avionics. She was more comfortable because it was easier to use, more user friendly.

She would like to do whatever she was most comfortable with instead of taking the time to learn the other systems such as the Century 2000 AP. Regarding the operation of the AP and the trim, which could be an issue for her. The AP would give an indication (flashing) for trim up or trim down based on performance, attitude, and power settings. If the AP flashed trim down or up, she would go to the manual trim control which was hard for her to grasp and visualize; sometimes she would do it incorrectly. Sometimes she would trim up/down the wrong way and the AP would blink faster and faster, basically telling her that she is going the wrong way. That could be a problem if she turned off the AP, the airplane could react harshly if the airplane was out of trim. For instance, she could get "flustered." If that trim was in the wrong position, if the autopilot was not happy, she would just disconnect it and fly manually.

There is no audible indication on the trim, only a light that blinks telling the pilot what action to take. If it blinks faster, its "really" telling the pilot what action to take.

She would press the Down or Up button repeatably. "I would just tell her to gently press and hold the button down," She would "repeatedly push it," and he had to remind her.

Regarding her knowledge and use of the airplane systems. She was over reliant on the technology instead of basic airmanship or stick and rudder skills. She knew how to fly the airplane and if you looked in her logbook and took it at face value, one would think that she was further along in her skills than she exhibited.

Regarding flight training objectives, she wanted to make her own schedule sometimes. He would insist that we did the instruction as designed, but she would want to do something different. What she really needed was more time learning the aerodynamics and the airplane systems, which was what he was trying to teach her, especially given that she was training for her instrument. He had to remind her that during the check ride, she would have to be truly knowledgeable of the instruments and systems.

Going back to the pilot skills at this point in her training; the hours on paper and number of approaches she had done could lead someone to believe that she was further along than she was. Her fundamental skills were lacking. Her mind and her knowledge and skill level were further behind than her hours and approaches on paper would indicate.

Psychologically, she never appeared "off" and did not exhibit unusual behavior. She was sick once; she was getting over something, but there was nothing else that stood out. Did she ever have a "bad day" flying? Aside from being sick once, never. No one flight stands out where she performed very poorly, just the things I mentioned earlier; "I'd have to say no."

Regarding her situational awareness. She could fly the airplane. It was decent, but she needed help consistently. If an experienced instructor or pilot were not there in the right seat, she would likely not do to well between the radios, communication and managing the aircraft; I imagine she would get behind or lose situational awareness quickly. She just needed more training and confidence.

[END]