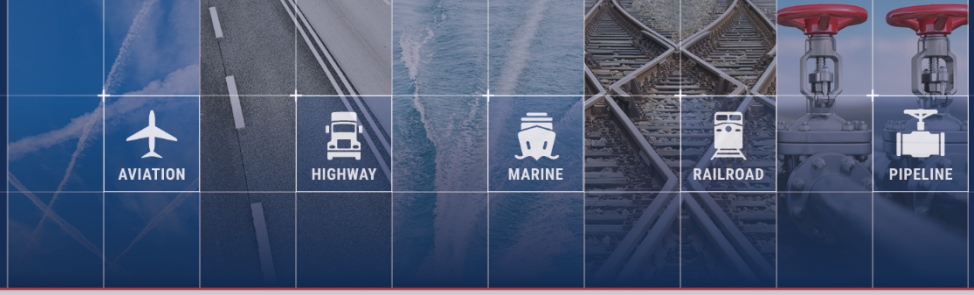


# Aviation Investigation Final Report

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Location:** | DEATH VALLEY, California | **Accident Number:** | LAX96FA249 |
| **Date & Time:** | December 23, 1995, 12:45 Local | **Registration:** | N7304P |
| **Aircraft:** | Piper PA-24-250 | **Aircraft Damage:** | Destroyed |
| **Defining Event:** | | **Injuries:** | 1 Fatal |
| **Flight Conducted Under:** | Part 91: General aviation - Personal | | |

## Analysis

The non-instrument rated pilot departed northern California on December 23, 1995, on a cross-country flight to Arizona. He did not file a flight plan. He failed to arrive and a search was initiated without success. On June 27, 1996, microwave technicians spotted the wreckage en route to an antenna site. The aircraft collided with the crest of a ridge line in a near level cruise flight attitude. The emergency locator beacon had been destroyed by impact and postcrash fire damage. A resort in the area had been called during the initial search to see if the pilot landed there as he had in the past. Resort personnel reported that there had been no aircraft traffic that day due to low clouds, rain, and snow showers. The wreckage was located about 16 miles from the resort.

## Probable Cause and Findings

The National Transportation Safety Board determines the probable cause(s) of this accident to be: the non-instrument rated pilot's intentional VFR flight into instrument meteorological conditions.

### Findings

Occurrence #1: IN FLIGHT COLLISION WITH TERRAIN/WATER
Phase of Operation: CRUISE

Findings
1. TERRAIN CONDITION - MOUNTAINOUS/HILLY

2. (F) WEATHER CONDITION - LOW CEILING
3. (F) WEATHER CONDITION - SNOW
4. (C) VFR FLIGHT INTO IMC - INTENTIONAL - PILOT IN COMMAND
5. (C) WEATHER EVALUATION - IMPROPER - PILOT IN COMMAND

## Factual Information

HISTORY OF FLIGHT

On December 23, 1995, about 1245 hours Pacific standard time, a Piper PA-24-250, N7304P, was destroyed after colliding with mountainous terrain near Death Valley, California. The pilot was fatally injured. According to witnesses, instrument meteorological conditions prevailed for the personal cross-country flight and no flight plan was filed. The flight originated at Nervino, California, on the day of the accident about 1030 hours, and was destined for Lake Havasu City, Arizona.

Concerned family members notified the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) and other agencies when the aircraft did not arrive at its destination. They also contacted various airports along the route. The nearest airport to the accident site was Furnace Creek Airport in Death Valley. Personnel at the Furnace Creek Inn stated there was no traffic in or out of the airport that day due to low clouds and generally poor weather.

According to a friend of the pilot, he would stop at Furnace Creek en route to Lake Havasu to drop off a Christmas tree for friends.

The FAA Prescott Automated Flight Service Station issued an ALNOT for the overdue aircraft. The Civil Air Patrol (CAP) initiated a search. During the course of the search, the CAP obtained radar data from various radar facilities both military and FAA. There was no flight plan, positive radar identification, or voice communication during the flight. The radar data was reviewed for VFR 1200 code aircraft based on a probable route of flight and approximate times.

The radar data that had been generated during the search nearest the accident site was reviewed. An aircraft squawking a VFR code of 1200 had approached the Beatty VOR from the northwest near the approximate accident time. It had been cruising at various altitudes from a high of 15,600 feet msl to about 10,400 feet msl, when it arrived in the vicinity of Beatty. At that point, the aircraft started a circling descent in the vicinity of the VOR. The last recorded radar hit was at 8,400 msl. The Beatty Airport elevation is 3,170 feet msl.

The aircraft was not located within the normal search time allotted and the search was closed.

On June 27, 1996, the aircraft wreckage was discovered by microwave technicians en route to an antenna site in the remote area of Death Valley's Greenwater Mountain Range at an elevation of 4,000 feet msl. The location was 36 degrees 18 minutes 15 seconds north by 116 degrees 38 minutes 48 west, or 153 degree radial of the Beatty VOR at 30 nautical miles. The location was 16 miles east of Furnace Creek.

PERSONNEL INFORMATION

The private pilot's logbook was not recovered. According to FAA medical records, at his November 15, 1995, third-class flight physical he reported a total flight time of 700 hours with 45 hours in the last 6 months.

AIRCRAFT INFORMATION

The logbooks and other records for the aircraft were not reviewed by the Safety Board. A request was made of a family member for copies of the logbook's last entries and front pages and other pertinent records. A copy of an invoice from Nervino Aero Service No. 829 was obtained from a family member. The invoice documented an annual inspection conducted on the accident aircraft on February 3, 1993. At that time, it listed 4,927 hours as being the total airframe time. Copies of engine (2-4-93) and airframe (2-5-93) log entries were received with times as on the Nervino invoice. The recording tachometer was destroyed. Copies of all maintenance information that was recovered are attached to this report.

Nervino Aero Service was contacted for additional information regarding maintenance on the aircraft. They reported that was the last time they worked on the aircraft and were unaware of any other source of maintenance for the aircraft. They did not recall if an oxygen system was installed in the aircraft.

WRECKAGE AND IMPACT INFORMATION

An on-scene accident site examination was conducted on June 28,1996.

The wreckage path was oriented to the southwest (240 degrees) over a distance about 355 feet. The first point of contact was observed to be an outcropping of pointed rock formations about 3 feet above the general grade of the ridge line. From that contact point the grade descended down at 20 degrees over a distance of 120 feet into a gully. The left wing was found in the gully and was severed from the leading edge straight back and through the middle of the left wing flap. The damaged wing flap was separated from the wing structure.

The main impact point was located by a crater 150 feet from the initial point of impact (IPI). A propeller blade was located 158 feet from the IPI. The propeller hub and the other blade were found separated from the engine crankshaft flange. Both propeller blades displayed leading edge damage aft bending and chordwise striations.

The main wreckage was located 60 feet from the top of a ridge line. A postcrash fire consumed a majority of the cabin and center section of the airframe.

Both magnetos were destroyed by fire damage. The vacuum pump was found molten. The carbon block and vanes were intact. The drive coupling was ashen, but intact. The engine oil

filter canister was cut open and examined and there were no foreign materials found. The emergency locator beacon was found destroyed by fire. The damaged altimeter barometer setting was at 30.15 inHg.

All major airframe components were accounted for at the accident site. Complete control continuity was not possible due to the fragmentation and postcrash fire damage. The landing gear retract system and the wing flap system were retracted at the time of the accident.

There were remnants of about three Christmas type trees found at the accident site.

METEOROLOGICAL INFORMATION

The nearest official weather reporting facility is located 70 miles southeast of the accident site. According to an Inyo County sheriff deputy and local area witnesses at Furnace Creek, the weather was poor with low clouds and snow showers. The weather system is shown on the weather charts provided by the Department of the Air Force (AFRCC) at Langley AFB, Virginia.

MEDICAL AND PATHOLOGICAL INFORMATION

On June 28, 1996, the Inyo County deputy coroner performed a cursory examination on the remains in an attempt to positively identify the pilot. There was no toxicological examination performed.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

The Safety Board did not take possession of the wreckage. The wreckage was not recovered. There was no insurance coverage on the aircraft.

## Pilot Information

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|---|---|---|---|
| **Certificate:** | Private | **Age:** | 57,Male |
| **Airplane Rating(s):** | Single-engine land | **Seat Occupied:** | Unknown |
| **Other Aircraft Rating(s):** | None | **Restraint Used:** | |
| **Instrument Rating(s):** | None | **Second Pilot Present:** | No |
| **Instructor Rating(s):** | None | **Toxicology Performed:** | No |
| **Medical Certification:** | Class 3 Valid Medical--w/ waivers/lim | **Last FAA Medical Exam:** | November 15, 1995 |
| **Occupational Pilot:** | No | **Last Flight Review or Equivalent:** | |
| **Flight Time:** | 700 hours (Total, all aircraft), 23 hours (Last 90 days, all aircraft) | | |

## Aircraft and Owner/Operator Information

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Aircraft Make:** | Piper | **Registration:** | N7304P |
| **Model/Series:** | PA-24-250 PA-24-250 | **Aircraft Category:** | Airplane |
| **Year of Manufacture:** | | **Amateur Built:** | |
| **Airworthiness Certificate:** | Normal | **Serial Number:** | 24-2479 |
| **Landing Gear Type:** | Retractable - Tricycle | **Seats:** | 4 |
| **Date/Type of Last Inspection:** | February 3, 1993 Annual | **Certified Max Gross Wt.:** | 2900 lbs |
| **Time Since Last Inspection:** | | **Engines:** | 1 Reciprocating |
| **Airframe Total Time:** | | **Engine Manufacturer:** | Lycoming |
| **ELT:** | Installed, not activated | **Engine Model/Series:** | O-540-A1D5 |
| **Registered Owner:** | LAVERN K. DEBERG | **Rated Power:** | 250 Horsepower |
| **Operator:** | | **Operating Certificate(s) Held:** | None |
| **Operator Does Business As:** | | **Operator Designator Code:** | |

## Meteorological Information and Flight Plan

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Conditions at Accident Site:** | Instrument (IMC) | **Condition of Light:** | Day |
| **Observation Facility, Elevation:** | | **Distance from Accident Site:** | |
| **Observation Time:** | | **Direction from Accident Site:** | |
| **Lowest Cloud Condition:** | Unknown | **Visibility** | |
| **Lowest Ceiling:** | Unknown | **Visibility (RVR):** | |
| **Wind Speed/Gusts:** | / | **Turbulence Type Forecast/Actual:** | / |
| **Wind Direction:** | 0° | **Turbulence Severity Forecast/Actual:** | / |
| **Altimeter Setting:** | | **Temperature/Dew Point:** | |
| **Precipitation and Obscuration:** | N/A - None - Snow | | |
| **Departure Point:** | NERVINO , CA (0O2 ) | **Type of Flight Plan Filed:** | None |
| **Destination:** | LAKE HAVASU , AZ (HII ) | **Type of Clearance:** | None |
| **Departure Time:** | 11:00 Local | **Type of Airspace:** | Class G |

## Airport Information

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Airport:** | | **Runway Surface Type:** | |
| **Airport Elevation:** | | **Runway Surface Condition:** | |
| **Runway Used:** | 0 | **IFR Approach:** | None |
| **Runway Length/Width:** | | **VFR Approach/Landing:** | |

## Wreckage and Impact Information

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Crew Injuries:** | 1 Fatal | **Aircraft Damage:** | Destroyed |
| **Passenger Injuries:** | | **Aircraft Fire:** | On-ground |
| **Ground Injuries:** | N/A | **Aircraft Explosion:** | None |
| **Total Injuries:** | 1 Fatal | **Latitude, Longitude:** | 36.600616,-116.830352(est) |

## Administrative Information

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|---|---|
| **Investigator In Charge (IIC):** | Petterson, George |
| **Additional Participating Persons:** | JERRY C SUMMERS; LAS VEGAS , NV<br>CHARLES R LITTLE; VERO BEACH , FL |
| **Original Publish Date:** | January 8, 1997 |
| **Last Revision Date:** | |
| **Investigation Class:** | Class |
| **Note:** | |
| **Investigation Docket:** | https://data.ntsb.gov/Docket?ProjectID=29284 |