



Aviation Investigation Final Report

Location:	STOIL, California	Accident Number:	LAX98LA054
Date & Time:	December 24, 1997, 11:50 Local	Registration:	N91915
Aircraft:	Piper J3C-65	Aircraft Damage:	Destroyed
Defining Event:		Injuries:	1 Serious
Flight Conducted Under:	Part 91: General aviation - Personal		

Analysis

The pilot desired to become an agricultural pilot and was practicing low passes over a field. The pilot failed to see three power transmission cables and the airplane struck a 300-foot-span of number 8 gauge copper conductor suspended about 45 to 50 feet above the ground with its propeller. An in-flight fire erupted in the cockpit area. The fire was located at a break in a fuel line from the fuel selector valve to the engine. The pilot suffered second and third degree burns to his face, arms, and left leg and landed the airplane hard, collapsing one of the main landing gear. He egressed the airplane unaided while the fire spread destroying the airplane. There was no evidence of mechanical failures or malfunctions with the airplane before the collision with power transmission cables.

Probable Cause and Findings

The National Transportation Safety Board determines the probable cause(s) of this accident to be: The pilot's failure to maintain adequate obstacle clearance and his inadequate visual outlook.. Factors were a severed fuel line which resulted in an in-flight fire, which diminished the pilot's ability to land the airplane with smoke and fire in the cockpit.

Findings

Occurrence #1: IN FLIGHT COLLISION WITH OBJECT
Phase of Operation: MANEUVERING

Findings

1. OBJECT - WIRE, TRANSMISSION
2. (C) VISUAL LOOKOUT - INADEQUATE - PILOT IN COMMAND

Occurrence #2: FIRE

Phase of Operation: EMERGENCY DESCENT/LANDING

Findings

3. (F) FUEL SYSTEM, LINE FITTING - CUT/SEVERED
4. FLUID, FUEL - FIRE

Occurrence #3: GEAR COLLAPSED

Phase of Operation: LANDING - FLARE/TOUCHDOWN

Findings

5. (F) FUSELAGE, CREW COMPARTMENT - FIRE
6. (F) AIRCRAFT CONTROL - DIMINISHED - PILOT IN COMMAND
7. FLARE - MISJUDGED - PILOT IN COMMAND
8. LANDING GEAR, MAIN GEAR - OVERLOAD

Factual Information

On December 24, 1997, at 1150 hours Pacific standard time, a Piper J3C-65, N91915, collided with wires and landed in an open field near Stoil, California. The airplane was destroyed by postimpact fire. The certificated commercial pilot, and sole occupant, received serious injuries. The airplane was being operated by the pilot as a personal flight when the accident occurred. The local area flight originated from a private farm airstrip near Tulare, California, at 1045. Visual meteorological conditions prevailed.

According to the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA), the pilot recently received his commercial pilot certificate on October 26, 1997. The pilot indicated he desired to become an agricultural pilot and was practicing low passes over a field. The airplane struck a 300-foot-span of number 8 gauge copper conductor suspended about 45 to 50 feet above the ground with its propeller. The pilot told an FAA inspector an in-flight fire erupted in the cockpit area after the collision with the power transmission cable. The fire was located at a break in a fuel line from the fuel selector valve to the engine.

The pilot landed the airplane, collapsing one of the main landing gear. He egressed the airplane unaided. The fire spread destroying the airplane. The pilot suffered second and third degree burns to his face, arms, and left leg.

The pilot stated in his accident report that he failed to see the power transmission cables before the collision. The pilot also indicated there were no mechanical failures or malfunctions with the airplane.

Pilot Information

Certificate:	Commercial	Age:	28, Male
Airplane Rating(s):	Single-engine land	Seat Occupied:	Front
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 2 Valid Medical--no waivers/lim.	Last FAA Medical Exam:	October 22, 1997
Occupational Pilot:	UNK	Last Flight Review or Equivalent:	
Flight Time:	280 hours (Total, all aircraft), 170 hours (Total, this make and model), 227 hours (Pilot In Command, all aircraft), 29 hours (Last 90 days, all aircraft), 10 hours (Last 30 days, all aircraft), 1 hours (Last 24 hours, all aircraft)		

Aircraft and Owner/Operator Information

Aircraft Make:	Piper	Registration:	N91915
Model/Series:	J3C-65 J3C-65	Aircraft Category:	Airplane
Year of Manufacture:		Amateur Built:	
Airworthiness Certificate:	Normal	Serial Number:	16330
Landing Gear Type:	Tailwheel	Seats:	2
Date/Type of Last Inspection:	February 6, 1997 Annual	Certified Max Gross Wt.:	1220 lbs
Time Since Last Inspection:	168 Hrs	Engines:	1 Reciprocating
Airframe Total Time:	4790 Hrs	Engine Manufacturer:	Continental
ELT:	Not installed	Engine Model/Series:	C85
Registered Owner:	COTTLE, WILLIAM L	Rated Power:	85 Horsepower
Operator:		Operating Certificate(s) Held:	None
Operator Does Business As:		Operator Designator Code:	

Meteorological Information and Flight Plan

Conditions at Accident Site:	Visual (VMC)	Condition of Light:	Day
Observation Facility, Elevation:	VIS ,292 ft msl	Distance from Accident Site:	24 Nautical Miles
Observation Time:	12:36 Local	Direction from Accident Site:	351°
Lowest Cloud Condition:	Clear	Visibility	10 miles
Lowest Ceiling:	None	Visibility (RVR):	
Wind Speed/Gusts:	3 knots /	Turbulence Type Forecast/Actual:	/
Wind Direction:	150°	Turbulence Severity Forecast/Actual:	/
Altimeter Setting:	30 inches Hg	Temperature/Dew Point:	8°C / 2°C
Precipitation and Obscuration:	No Obscuration; No Precipitation		
Departure Point:	TULARE , CA	Type of Flight Plan Filed:	None
Destination:		Type of Clearance:	None
Departure Time:	10:45 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:	Forced landing

Wreckage and Impact Information

Crew Injuries:	1 Serious	Aircraft Damage:	Destroyed
Passenger Injuries:		Aircraft Fire:	In-flight
Ground Injuries:	N/A	Aircraft Explosion:	None
Total Injuries:	1 Serious	Latitude, Longitude:	35.859188,-119.460968(est)

Administrative Information

Investigator In Charge (IIC):	Wilcox, Thomas
Additional Participating Persons:	ERWIN LITTAU; FRESNO , CA
Original Publish Date:	January 28, 2000
Last Revision Date:	
Investigation Class:	Class
Note:	
Investigation Docket:	https://data.nts.gov/Docket?ProjectID=30008

The National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) is an independent federal agency charged by Congress with investigating every civil aviation accident in the United States and significant events in other modes of transportation—railroad, transit, highway, marine, pipeline, and commercial space. We determine the probable causes of the accidents and events we investigate, and issue safety recommendations aimed at preventing future occurrences. In addition, we conduct transportation safety research studies and offer information and other assistance to family members and survivors for each accident or event we investigate. We also serve as the appellate authority for enforcement actions involving aviation and mariner certificates issued by the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) and US Coast Guard, and we adjudicate appeals of civil penalty actions taken by the FAA.

The NTSB does not assign fault or blame for an accident or incident; rather, as specified by NTSB regulation, “accident/incident investigations are fact-finding proceedings with no formal issues and no adverse parties ... and are not conducted for the purpose of determining the rights or liabilities of any person” (Title 49 *Code of Federal Regulations* section 831.4). Assignment of fault or legal liability is not relevant to the NTSB’s statutory mission to improve transportation safety by investigating accidents and incidents and issuing safety recommendations. In addition, statutory language prohibits the admission into evidence or use of any part of an NTSB report related to an accident in a civil action for damages resulting from a matter mentioned in the report (Title 49 *United States Code* section 1154(b)). A factual report that may be admissible under 49 *United States Code* section 1154(b) is available [here](#).