



Aviation Investigation Final Report

Location:	SAN LUIS OBISPO, California	Accident Number:	LAX00FA354
Date & Time:	September 30, 2000, 22:35 Local	Registration:	N2493G
Aircraft:	Piper PA-38	Aircraft Damage:	Destroyed
Defining Event:		Injuries:	1 Fatal, 1 Serious
Flight Conducted Under:	Part 91: General aviation - Personal		

Analysis

The recently certificated, non-instrument rated, private pilot took off in conditions of nighttime darkness from a coastal valley airport and climbed over a sparsely lighted area toward rising terrain. The airplane entered low stratus clouds that were not visible to the pilot until the airplane flew into them. He attempted to reverse course back toward the airport; however, during the turn the right wingtip contacted terrain in a plowed field and the airplane cartwheeled to the ground. The accident site was 4 miles from the departure airport and 120 feet higher elevation. The pilot obtained his certificate about 3 weeks prior and had 55 total flying hours, which included 5 hours at night. The pilot reported there were no mechanical problems with the aircraft.

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 clearance from terrain while turning to reverse course following inadvertent nighttime flight into instrument meteorological conditions. A factor in the accident was the pilot's lack of experience in nighttime operations.

Findings

Occurrence #1: IN FLIGHT ENCOUNTER WITH WEATHER
Phase of Operation: CLIMB - TO CRUISE

Findings

1. WEATHER CONDITION - FOG
2. WEATHER CONDITION - CLOUDS
3. LIGHT CONDITION - DARK NIGHT
4. VFR FLIGHT INTO IMC - INADVERTENT - PILOT IN COMMAND

Occurrence #2: IN FLIGHT COLLISION WITH TERRAIN/WATER
Phase of Operation: MANEUVERING - TURN TO REVERSE DIRECTION

Findings

5. (C) ALTITUDE/CLEARANCE - NOT MAINTAINED - PILOT IN COMMAND
6. (F) LACK OF TOTAL EXPERIENCE IN TYPE OPERATION - PILOT IN COMMAND

Factual Information

HISTORY OF FLIGHT

On September 30, 2000, about 2235 hours Pacific daylight time, a Piper PA-38, N2493G, was destroyed by impact with terrain near San Luis Obispo, California. The private pilot was seriously injured and the sole passenger was fatally injured. The personal flight, operated by Mazzei Flying Service under 14 CFR Part 91, departed from the San Luis Obispo County-McChesney Field airport about 2230, and was destined for Fresno Yosemite International airport at Fresno, California. Visual meteorological conditions prevailed and no flight plan was filed.

At 0042, on October 1, 2000, a caller to the San Luis Obispo County Sheriff's Department emergency (911) dispatcher reported that he had crashed his airplane and needed help. See "COMMUNICATIONS," below, for information about this phone call.

The pilot later told the Safety Board investigator that the purpose of the trip from Fresno to San Luis Obispo was to visit friends there. He and his passenger arrived about midday, serviced the aircraft, and left the airport with his friends. After spending the afternoon and evening, they left his friend's house to return to the airport about 10 P.M. He recalled being only slightly apprehensive as he preflighted the airplane and taxied for departure. He said that his apprehension was more due to concern about doing a good job of flying because his passenger was his best friend and he wanted to put her at ease. He had flown to San Luis Obispo previously, but never at night. He said that after takeoff they climbed out toward Fresno, and the flight was normal for about 5 minutes until they "hit a wall of clouds." He recalled turning back toward the direction he approached from, and the next thing he remembered was being out of the airplane at the accident site. He said he recalled being "frightened" by the clouds but believed he kept the airplane under control as he turned.

PERSONNEL INFORMATION

The pilot received his private pilot certificate on September 6, 2000, and had about 55 hours total flying time, which included 5 hours at night.

The pilot told the Safety Board investigator that his night flying training was primarily accomplished over the lighted city areas around Fresno, although he did recall flying some in the dark areas of the western San Joaquin Valley with the city lights distant. He had also flown one cross-country night flight as a passenger. He did not recall any training about the difference from daytime flying and the difficulty seeing clouds and dark terrain at night.

AIRCRAFT INFORMATION

The pilot later stated that, to the best of his recollection, there were no mechanical problems with the airplane contributing to the accident.

The airport attendant at San Luis Obispo airport reported adding 8.2 gallons of fuel, which filled the aircraft to capacity, about noon on September 30, 2000.

METEOROLOGICAL INFORMATION

A San Luis Obispo County Sheriff's Deputy who was among the early responders to the accident scene, reported that weather conditions consisted of low clouds and fog with heavy drizzle, and that the night was very dark. A second deputy, who is a commercial certificated pilot, estimated the overcast ceiling was at 300 feet (agl) and the visibility was near zero.

An evening social event was in progress at the winery where the pilot would later go to call for help. The event manager reported hearing an airplane fly over about 2215, and remarked to another guest that it seemed very low. She said she did not see the airplane, but that she did not really look for it. She didn't recall the clouds and ceiling, but said when she left the event about 2300 conditions were foggy.

According to a sun and moonlight sky illumination program (attached), sunset was at 1849, and the sun was 44.5 degrees below the horizon at the time of the accident. The moon was 19.7 degrees below the horizon and sky illumination was 13 percent of full-moon illumination.

COMMUNICATIONS

On October 1, 2000, the Safety Board investigator listened to a replay of the 911 call that was received by the San Luis Obispo County Sheriff's Department dispatcher, telephone position 3, at 0042 on October 1, 2000. The caller told the 911 operator that he had crashed a plane in a field, and that there was one other person still in the airplane and that he needed help. He did not know where he was but that he was in a building and had found his way to the telephone through an unlocked door. It was determined by the 911 operator that he was calling from the hospitality center at the Edna Valley Vineyards on Biddle Ranch Road and emergency vehicles were dispatched.

The caller complained that his jaw was dislocated; he had pain in his head, jaw, hands, feet, and back. He also said he was bleeding from the head. The caller sounded to the operator as though he was having difficulty remaining conscious and, while awaiting the responders, the 911 operator asked him a number of questions to keep him alert. At 0053, the dispatcher asked him where he had taken off from and the caller replied he had "departed 11 off San Luis Obispo," and then said "I tried to turn around because of clouds. I'm in a grape vineyard." At 0057, he reported seeing lights of emergency vehicles, and was shortly located by emergency responders.

WRECKAGE AND IMPACT INFORMATION

The accident location was in an unplanted, plowed section of land on a low, rolling, knoll about 4 miles southeast of the San Luis Obispo airport. Adjacent sections of land were planted in grape vineyards. The terrain at the accident site sloped gently downward to the west and northwest into the valley containing San Luis Obispo and rose in the distance to the east into the coastal mountain range. The location was at latitude 35 degrees 13.36 minutes north and longitude 120 degrees 36.25 minutes west. The elevation was 332 feet msl (GPS). All of the aircraft was present at the site and there was no fire.

The wreckage was distributed along a path about 300 feet long oriented approximately 290 degrees (magnetic) with the fuselage and wing wreckage at the northwest end. When viewed from the southeast end, looking northwest, the local terrain in the field sloped downward about 3 degrees, and the San Luis Obispo airport, elevation 209 feet msl, was visible at the lower elevation in the distance.

At the southeast end of the wreckage distribution was a furrow in the dirt, oriented northwest-southeast, about 6 inches wide and 10 feet long, in which were found small pieces of green glass and one position light lens retainer. About 25 feet further along in the field was an area freshly disturbed dirt, which was about 6 feet wide and 20 feet long. At 125-130 feet along the wreckage path, to the left of center, were the left landing gear strut and tire assembly, the nose wheel strut and tire assembly, and the right-hand wingtip fairing. Opposite, to the right of center, was the upper engine cowling and pieces of red glass resembling that of the left-hand position light lens. About 175 feet along the path, and 20 feet to the right of center, was the propeller with both blades bent smoothly aft about 45 degrees at the midspan, and with minor leading edge damage and chordwise striations. At 225 feet along the field was the right-hand cabin door; at 290 feet was the right-hand landing gear strut; and to the right about 5-feet, the left-hand cabin door.

The fuselage wreckage, including the empennage, the wings, and the engine, was at 300 feet in the wreckage path. The cockpit area was inverted and was pointed southwest. The engine and instrument panel were separated from the cockpit but remained attached by cables and wires and were laying on the ground adjacent to, but beside and behind, the cockpit to the northeast. The right wing, which exhibited a shredded appearance, was laying on the ground to the south, and was separated from the wing center section at the forward spar but remained attached by the aft spar and control cables. The left wing, which exhibited leading edge damage near the tip, remained attached to the wing center section and was inverted to the northwest of the cabin area. The fuselage tailcone was torn open and displaced to the right at two stations; one aft of the cockpit and the other at the base of the vertical fin.

Two components of the aircraft were located beyond the fuselage wreckage. The right-hand main landing gear wheel assembly was about 30 feet to the right of the centerline and 375 feet along the wreckage path, and the alternator armature assembly was located 30 feet to the right of center about 400 feet along the wreckage path.

MEDICAL AND PATHOLOGICAL INFORMATION

The pilot was treated at French Hospital in San Luis Obispo. According to the Medical Records Office at the hospital, no toxicology was performed at admission.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

According to the Federal Aviation Administration, Southwest Region Quality Assurance Office, the pilot did not receive a preflight weather briefing and no air traffic control services were provided to the flight.

The aircraft wreckage was released to Mr. Kenneth Steiner, Asst. Vice-President, USAIG Insurance Company on October 25, 2000.

Pilot Information

Certificate:	Private	Age:	17, Male
Airplane Rating(s):	Single-engine land	Seat Occupied:	Left
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--no waivers/lim.	Last FAA Medical Exam:	June 28, 2000
Occupational Pilot:	No	Last Flight Review or Equivalent:	
Flight Time:	55 hours (Total, all aircraft), 54 hours (Total, this make and model), 19 hours (Pilot In Command, all aircraft), 44 hours (Last 90 days, all aircraft), 15 hours (Last 30 days, all aircraft), 1 hours (Last 24 hours, all aircraft)		

Aircraft and Owner/Operator Information

Aircraft Make:	Piper	Registration:	N2493G
Model/Series:	PA-38 PA-38	Aircraft Category:	Airplane
Year of Manufacture:		Amateur Built:	
Airworthiness Certificate:	Utility	Serial Number:	38-79A0546
Landing Gear Type:	Tricycle	Seats:	2
Date/Type of Last Inspection:	September 8, 2000 100 hour	Certified Max Gross Wt.:	1670 lbs
Time Since Last Inspection:	72 Hrs	Engines:	1 Reciprocating
Airframe Total Time:	11702 Hrs	Engine Manufacturer:	Lycoming
ELT:	Installed	Engine Model/Series:	O-235-L2C
Registered Owner:	GOLDEN EAGLE ENTERPRISES, INC.	Rated Power:	112 Horsepower
Operator:	MAZZEI FLYING SERVICE	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:	Night/dark
Observation Facility, Elevation:	SBP ,209 ft msl	Distance from Accident Site:	3 Nautical Miles
Observation Time:	21:56 Local	Direction from Accident Site:	290°
Lowest Cloud Condition:	Clear	Visibility	6 miles
Lowest Ceiling:	None	Visibility (RVR):	
Wind Speed/Gusts:	5 knots /	Turbulence Type Forecast/Actual:	/
Wind Direction:	110°	Turbulence Severity Forecast/Actual:	/
Altimeter Setting:	29 inches Hg	Temperature/Dew Point:	59°C / 55°C
Precipitation and Obscuration:	No Obscuration; No Precipitation		
Departure Point:		Type of Flight Plan Filed:	None
Destination:	FRESNO , CA (FAT)	Type of Clearance:	None
Departure Time:	22:30 Local	Type of Airspace:	Class G

Airport Information

Airport:		Runway Surface Type:	
Airport Elevation:		Runway Surface Condition:	
Runway Used:	0	IFR Approach:	
Runway Length/Width:		VFR Approach/Landing:	

Wreckage and Impact Information

Crew Injuries:	1 Serious	Aircraft Damage:	Destroyed
Passenger Injuries:	1 Fatal	Aircraft Fire:	None
Ground Injuries:	N/A	Aircraft Explosion:	None
Total Injuries:	1 Fatal, 1 Serious	Latitude, Longitude:	35.249637,-120.61927(est)

Administrative Information

Investigator In Charge (IIC):	Parker, Richard
Additional Participating Persons:	MARGARET R FREYDOZ; SAN JOSE , CA CHARLES R LITTLE; VERO BEACH , FL MARK W PLATT; WILLIAMSPORT , PA
Original Publish Date:	November 6, 2001
Last Revision Date:	
Investigation Class:	Class
Note:	
Investigation Docket:	https://data.nts.gov/Docket?ProjectID=50379

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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](#).