

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

NATIONAL TRANSPORTATION SAFETY BOARD

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Investigation of: *

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FATAL CRASH OF CESSNA A185F N5454E *

OPERATED BY JIM WEBSTER'S FLYING * Accident No.: ANC20LA046

SERVICE, NEAR NUISQUT, ALASKA, *

ON MAY 14, 2020 *

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Interview of: BENJAMIN JONES, Research Professor

Institute of Northern Engineering, University of
Alaska Fairbanks

Via telephone

Friday,

May 22, 2020

APPEARANCES:

BRICE BANNING, Senior Aircraft Accident Investigator
National Transportation Safety Board

DUSTIN HOPKINS, Investigator in Charge
Federal Aviation Administration

BILL SCHNABLE, Dean
College of Engineering and Mines
University of Alaska Fairbanks

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I N T E R V I E W

(2:03 p.m.)

MR. BANNING: And it is 1403 on Friday the 22nd, and we are on the record. My name is Brice Banning, and I am a senior aircraft accident investigator with the National Transportation Safety Board. We're investigating accident ANC20LA046.

The NTSB is an independent federal agency charged with determining the probable cause of transportation accidents and promoting transportation safety. The NTSB is not part of the Department of Transportation or the FAA, and it has no regulatory or enforcement powers.

At this point, I'd like if we can go around the phone if you will, and introduce each other. Dustin?

MR. HOPKINS: This is Dustin Hopkins with the Federal Aviation Administration. I've been appointed as investigator in charge of the accident for N5454E, an aircraft operated by Jim Webster's Flying Service. And that's who I am.

MR. BANNING: Ben?

MR. JONES: Yeah, this is Benjamin Jones. I'm a research professor at the University of Alaska Fairbanks, Institute of Northern Engineering in Fairbanks, Alaska. And I was the surviving passenger on the plane crash involving N5454E and Jim Webster.

MR. BANNING: And, Bill?

MR. SCHNABLE: Yes, I am Bill Schnable, the dean of the

1 College of Engineering and Mines at the University of Alaska
2 Fairbanks, and I oversee the Institute of Northern Engineering as
3 part -- as dean of the college, and I am Ben Jones' direct
4 supervisor at UAF.

5 MR. BANNING: And -- thank you. And, Ben, do you have any
6 objection to anybody that has been introduced on the phone being
7 part of the interview?

8 MR. JONES: No objection.

9 MR. BANNING: Thank you. Today, we'll be using the services
10 of a digital recorder to record the interview that -- which will
11 then be sent for transcription. The transcript, not the audio
12 recording, will be made a part of the public docket.

13 Ben, do you have any objection to the interview being
14 recorded?

15 MR. JONES: No objection.

16 MR. BANNING: Thank you. And, Dustin, do you have any
17 objection?

18 MR. HOPKINS: No, sir.

19 MR. BANNING: And, Bill?

20 MR. SCHNABLE: I do not have any objections.

21 MR. BANNING: Thank you. The purpose of the investigation is
22 safety, to determine probable cause and prevent recurrence. Our
23 role is not to assign fault, blame, or liability. This interview
24 is part of the fact-finding phase of the investigation. We
25 cannot, however, offer any guarantee of confidentiality or

1 immunity.

2 Each of the group members will have a chance to ask
3 questions. We will ask questions one at a time, and any --
4 everyone has been instructed to not interrupt the person who is
5 asking the questions at the time. There will be the opportunity
6 for each group member to ask follow up questions after each person
7 has had a turn.

8 Ben, if you can answer any questions we ask to the best of
9 your recollection. If you don't understand a question or you need
10 it repeated, just let us know. Or if you realize you misstated or
11 need to modify an answer, it's no problem, just please do so.

12 MR. JONES: Okay.

13 MR. BANNING: And, Ben, you are entitled to have one
14 representative of your choosing. Is there someone you would like
15 to have as your representative?

16 MR. JONES: Yes. Yeah, Dean Bill -- William Schnable.

17 MR. BANNING: Thank you. And do you have any questions, Ben?

18 MR. JONES: No questions. I'm -- yeah, I'm looking forward
19 to just kind of recollecting the events of that day. And it might
20 be a little tough for me from time to time, I guess, as I'm
21 talking, so just bear with me if that's okay.

22 MR. BANNING: Yeah, absolutely. And if you need to take a
23 break, whatever you need, just let us know. We're completely
24 flexible. We just really appreciate you being willing to visit
25 with us.

1 MR. JONES: Okay.

2 INTERVIEW OF BENJAMIN JONES

3 BY MR. BANNING:

4 Q. So, Ben, I -- what I'd like to do now is just kind of have us
5 -- have you tell us your story if you would, maybe from starting
6 Thursday. I talked to Ms. Webster, and she indicated you -- she
7 -- that you guys had made an earlier flight. And maybe if you
8 could just start some time in there? And --

9 A. Yeah. I'll -- actually I'll start on the previous day if
10 that's okay?

11 Q. No, that'd be perfect. Wherever you'd like to. So --

12 A. Okay.

13 Q. I'll just turn it over to you. And once again, if you need a
14 break or anything, I understand this can be really difficult. So
15 just let us know. We can stop the recorder. We can do whatever
16 you need. And I'll turn it over to you.

17 A. Okay. Thanks, Brice.

18 Q. Thank you.

19 A. Okay. So I had planned basically a 4-day trip from Fairbanks
20 to Teshekpuk Lake with Jim Webster. And we had been planning it,
21 say, for the last 10 days or so, but we were kind of waiting for
22 weather -- like a good weather window to open up. So we had been
23 monitoring weather pretty much daily since about the 9th, I would
24 say -- I believe it was.

25 And it was pretty windy for a few days there around the 10th,

1 11th, and 12th, and then things started to calm down on the 13th
2 in the morning. And the skies opened up, so it was clear up there
3 on the morning of the 13th. And so we decided to meet at Jim's
4 plane at the float plane pond in Fairbanks around, I believe it
5 was 2:00 p.m. on the 13th.

6 We loaded up his plane. It was on tundra tires with skis.
7 We taxied down to the far end of the runway to the west side of
8 the runway here in Fairbanks, and we took off to the east. I
9 believe it took about, more or less 4 hours en route from the
10 airport here in Fairbanks to the old NARL cabin at Teshekpuk Lake,
11 which is on the northwest corner of the lake. It's an old cabin
12 from the Naval Arctic Research Lab days that I have been
13 rehabilitating for about 14 years now into a remote arctic
14 research station.

15 The skies were clear on the way up and through the Brooks
16 Range, through the passes. It was overcast in the foothills. We
17 were above the clouds and then kind of broke north of the Colville
18 River, I guess, that day. And then it was clear all the way up to
19 Teshekpuk Lake.

20 So we landed that evening. We basically spent the evening
21 just opening up the cabin, unloading our gear. I maintain a
22 number of instruments that are kind of in and around the vicinity
23 of the cabin, so I just walked around and kind of serviced those
24 in the evening. I made dinner, and then I believe we were in bed
25 by probably, like, 10:30 or 11:00 p.m. that night.

1 We woke up on Thursday morning, the 14th, and it was
2 overcast. Visibility was good. We have a number of landmarks
3 that we can see from the cabin that allows us to kind of judge our
4 -- judge the visibility from typically where the plane is. We
5 could see two bluffs to the east of the cabin. One is about 4
6 miles away, and the other is about 7 miles away.

7 The ceiling that morning -- it was a little bit hard to
8 determine the height of the ceiling due to how overcast it was and
9 just kind of the white snow on the ground with the overcast skies.
10 So we didn't feel like flying early in the morning, so we
11 basically just messed around the cabin. I was messing with my
12 instruments and kind of like my power system there for a while.

13 We had lunch, and then about 2:00, we started to see a
14 horizon. We checked weather in Deadhorse and in Barrow. I have
15 internet -- satellite internet there, so it allows us to log on
16 and check the Alaska Weather Service station list sites and the
17 FAA cams and the METARs.

18 So we checked all of that about 1:00 p.m. that day on the
19 14th. Yeah, the visibility was maintaining 7, 10 miles probably
20 at that point. So we called the -- yeah, I guess one other thing
21 to mention is Jim would always file a master flight plan with the
22 FAA office in Fairbanks, but then once we were on site on the
23 North Slope, we would always file local flight plans with the
24 office in Deadhorse.

25 So Jim called flight services, FAA, Deadhorse around -- I

1 think around 2:00 p.m. We filed a flight plan for, I believe it
2 was 3 hours. It might have been for 4 hours, that we were going
3 to head out 10 miles to the middle of Teshekpuk Lake to service a
4 station that we had maintained in the ice out there that was
5 installed back in January.

6 So we took off around 2:00 p.m. It's a quick flight to the
7 middle of the lake; we were on the ground, no problem -- we were
8 on the ice, no problem, by probably 2:15 or so. We were out there
9 working until, I think some time around 4:30 possibly, maybe
10 closer to 5:00. And towards the end of that work, my battery
11 operated drill broke, which kind of slowed me down just measuring
12 the ice thickness in the middle of the lake. And so at that
13 point, we returned back to the old NARL cabin. We landed on the
14 lake ice in front of the cabin. We canceled the flight plan with
15 Deadhorse.

16 I know Jim texted his wife, Joanie, just saying that we were
17 back at the camp okay. She flight follows. She would flight
18 follow for us using Jim's -- Jim had a SPOT messenger that he
19 always kept on the dash. But he would always check in via text
20 message through an iPhone when we were coming back to camp or
21 leaving, or he would call her on the -- on a satellite phone. I
22 do something very similar with my wife. She always flight follows
23 for me. I have an inReach device, and so whenever we come and go
24 from a particular location or get back to camp, I would just send
25 her a message.

1 So I think that was about 5:00. So we came back to camp to
2 get some new equipment. I had to charge batteries for a backup
3 drill that I had there. And so over the course of, say, the next
4 2 hours, I believe I charged three batteries. We wanted to go to
5 two sites that were to the southwest of the cabin that neither Jim
6 nor I had been to before. And so we didn't think it was a bad
7 idea that it was taking a little while to charge batteries,
8 because we were checking weather still in Deadhorse and in Barrow,
9 and the METARs were calling for -- or maybe it was the TAFs were
10 calling for things to start improving around 7:00 or 8:00 p.m.,
11 where our ceilings were going to lift to probably 1,000 feet and
12 become more or less cloudy instead of overcast.

13 So at that point, yeah, we were hanging out at the cabin. We
14 made dinner I think around 7:00. We were done by 7:30. We
15 checked weather; the forecast seemed like it was accurate. Things
16 were definitely improving. We could see off to our west probably,
17 like, two layers to the clouds.

18 We called flight services in Deadhorse sometime, like, around
19 8:00, or maybe a quarter to 8:00. And we filed a 3-hour flight
20 plan with the FAA and Deadhorse, telling them that we were going
21 to go about 25 to 30 miles southwest of our location at Tesh Lake.
22 We were going to visit two lakes there and then work our way back
23 to the cabin by making two other stops on Teshekpuk Lake.

24 So, yeah. So at that point, Jim hung up with flight
25 services, he went down to his plane. I believe he was going to

1 call Joanie on the satellite phone, and then he started to warm up
2 the plane. I called my wife on my iPhone through the Wi-Fi
3 calling, told her what the plan was, told her I would have my
4 inReach tracking, and that we would be probably about 3 hours out
5 that evening.

6 So we took off -- let's see, we took off to the east, and
7 then we banked around, headed west. There was a good feeling. I
8 definitely know that I checked my inReach tracker. And
9 unfortunately, like, it didn't leave a number -- it didn't leave
10 many track points, but there were -- there was one track point
11 that it recorded about probably, like, 10 miles west of the cabin.
12 And we were flying up above 700 feet.

13 We went over, yeah, 25, 30 miles to the southwest, landed on
14 a lake that is just to the west of one of the channels of the
15 Ikpihpuk River. We drilled a hole, installed a sensor. We took
16 off again, landed on another lake about -- I believe it was about
17 6 miles south of the first lake that we landed on. We drilled a
18 hole, installed another sensor, and then we took off and started
19 heading back to Teshehpuk Lake.

20 And the conditions were -- seemed like they were pretty
21 stable while we were out. Yeah, I remember coming back. We were
22 probably -- I -- like, I stay familiar with Jim's plane. I've
23 flown with him for a number of years now, and just -- like, I kind
24 of just know how things -- how he operates for one, and just his
25 dashboard and everything. And so, yeah, we were flying up above

1 (indiscernible) again, coming back to Teshekpuk Lake, and we
2 landed on a point of land that's southwest of the cabin. It's
3 roughly, like, probably 4 miles down the beach from the cabin. I
4 have a water level sensor that I maintain there. So we stopped,
5 we landed there, I serviced it.

6 I believe, at this point, it was probably pretty close to
7 10:00, maybe, like, quarter till 10:00, and then we decided not to
8 go back out to the middle of the lake to do anything there, that
9 we would try to make one more stop if the conditions were right.
10 And that was over at the North Slope Borough Wildlife Cabin, which
11 is on -- also on the northwest shore -- more the northern shore of
12 Teshekpuk Lake. It's across the northern bay of the lake from the
13 old NARL cabin by about 4 miles or so.

14 So we took off, I believe we were initially flying at around
15 500 feet above the ground. I think we dropped down to about 400
16 feet, maybe dropped down to around 300 feet as we were flying by
17 the cabin looking down. It looked like there was some jumbled up
18 ice kind of on that corner of the lake there, so we decided not to
19 give it a shot and land there on the lake in front of the cabin.

20 And then you could see that there was some ice wedge
21 polygons, there's kind of some hummocky bumps sticking out of the
22 tundra, so maybe the snow wasn't quite that packed down there. It
23 looked a little rough to try to land there, so what we decided,
24 was we would just bank around and go back to the old NARL cabin
25 and call it a day.

1 So it was basically as we were flying by the North Slope
2 Borough Wildlife cabin, we started to bank to the left. We banked
3 to the left, and then unfortunately that's basically what -- all I
4 can remember is basically banking around to the left. And then
5 the next thing I knew, we hit the ground.

6 We hit the ground off in the flats to the north of the cabin.
7 I actually haven't even looked at my location to see how far north
8 to the cabin we were. My guess would be maybe like within a
9 quarter mile to a half mile of the North Slope Borough cabin,
10 directly north. And then I could also look across, once I got out
11 of the wreckage, I could see the old NARL cabin, which is on the
12 bluff. That's probably 3½, 4 miles off to the southwest of where
13 the crash occurred.

14 God. Yeah, so upon impact, it was -- anyway, it was hard to
15 figure out what happened initially. We ended up upside down, I
16 knew that. I did not lose consciousness, I do not believe. I
17 unbuckled, I think pretty much instinctively right away, and fell
18 down to the top inside the aircraft -- to the ceiling, I guess you
19 could say. I crawled out my -- the passenger side door that was
20 still attached, but propped open.

21 [REDACTED] [REDACTED]
22 [REDACTED]
23 [REDACTED] [REDACTED], [REDACTED]
24 [REDACTED] [REDACTED]
25 [REDACTED] [REDACTED] [REDACTED]

1 [REDACTED] [REDACTED]. [REDACTED]
2 [REDACTED]
3 [REDACTED]
4 [REDACTED] [REDACTED]
5 [REDACTED] [REDACTED] [REDACTED]
6 [REDACTED] [REDACTED].
7 [REDACTED]
8 [REDACTED] [REDACTED]
9 [REDACTED] [REDACTED] [REDACTED]
10 [REDACTED]
11 [REDACTED]. [REDACTED]
12 [REDACTED]
13 [REDACTED]
14 [REDACTED] [REDACTED] [REDACTED]
15 [REDACTED] So I shut off the master, I flipped
16 the switch on ELT just because I wasn't sure if it went off. And
17 I guess I found out after the fact that it didn't automatically go
18 off, and flipping the switch on the ELT didn't have a positive
19 effect either. So yeah, I guess maybe just to get my wits about
20 me, I just started walking around. So I walked back up to where
21 we impacted the ground and just tried to, like, kind of piece it
22 together I guess in my mind a little bit on just the reality of
23 the plane crash and what just happened.
24 Fortunately on the walk up to where we hit the ground, I
25 found Jim's SPOT messenger in the snow. So I instantly hit the

1 HELP, 911 button on the SPOT messenger. I took that back to the
2 plane; I put it up on top of the plane as it was sitting upside
3 down. And while I was standing there, it came to me that I
4 couldn't find my inReach tracking device, but my cellphone --
5 iPhone was actually still paired to it through the Bluetooth. And
6 so I basically just started firing off messages to my wife.

7 I tried to initially hit the SOS on the app, but
8 unfortunately, that -- the way the app works with inReach, you
9 have to swipe across. Anyway, I had to -- I got so frustrated at
10 this point. You had to -- you have to swipe across the phone to
11 get this, like, little bar open up the SOS capability. And for
12 whatever reason, my phone wouldn't recognize my swipe. Whether it
13 was just my hands were too cold, or just, like, all the blood that
14 was, like, on the screen, I just could not swipe.

15 But what I was able to do was fire off about a dozen messages
16 to my wife -- my wife's cellphone very quickly. I told her we had
17 a crash, that we were north of the Borough cabin, which she's been
18 to the area before, so she knew where I was talking about. I told
19 her that it was really bad. I asked her to contact the AKRRC --
20 or the AKRCC. Prior to the trip up, I'd filed a trip plan with
21 them over the phone and also over email just telling them roughly
22 where we were going to be, what our contact -- emergency contact
23 information was, and the dates we would be gone.

24 It took her a second, I think, just to realize -- and maybe
25 just to get over the shock. And I think by about 10:20 -- so

1 probably with 20 minutes -- about 20 minutes after the crash, she
2 was basically in control. So she contacted the base in Anchorage
3 and then, through coordination with them, got in touch with the
4 North Slope Borough Search and Rescue and then was able to get on
5 the phone with North Slope Borough Search and Rescue. And I
6 believe by -- probably by 10:45 they had come up with a rescue
7 plan to come out and to retrieve us. Yeah, somewhere around
8 there, I could -- anyway, time kind of stood still for me out
9 there, but also things seemed like they took forever.

10 [REDACTED]
11 [REDACTED] [REDACTED]. [REDACTED]
12 [REDACTED] [REDACTED] [REDACTED]
13 [REDACTED] [REDACTED]. [REDACTED]
14 [REDACTED] [REDACTED]
15 -- [REDACTED] [REDACTED]
16 [REDACTED]
17 [REDACTED]
18 [REDACTED] [REDACTED] --
19 [REDACTED] [REDACTED] [REDACTED]
20 [REDACTED] [REDACTED].
21 [REDACTED] [REDACTED]
22 [REDACTED]
23 [REDACTED] [REDACTED]
24 [REDACTED]
25 [REDACTED] [REDACTED]

1 [REDACTED] [REDACTED]
2 [REDACTED] [REDACTED]
3 [REDACTED]
4 [REDACTED] [REDACTED]
5 [REDACTED] [REDACTED]
6 [REDACTED]
7 [REDACTED]
8 [REDACTED] [REDACTED]
9 [REDACTED]
10 [REDACTED]
11 [REDACTED] [REDACTED] [REDACTED]
12 [REDACTED]
13 [REDACTED] [REDACTED]
14 [REDACTED]
15 [REDACTED] [REDACTED] [REDACTED]
16 [REDACTED]
17 [REDACTED]
18 [REDACTED]
19 [REDACTED]

20 I got back to the plane. It was upside down, and it was
21 pointing -- yeah, the rotor, yeah, was off somewhere halfway
22 between the impact and where the plane was. But anyway, the plane
23 was pointing back towards where we hit the ground, and it was
24 upside down, like I said. My wing was attached still. The wing
25 on Jim's side of the plane, I -- it was there for sure. I

1 remember seeing it on the ground, but I don't think it was
2 actually attached to the plane. Yeah, once we flipped over, I
3 think it probably detached.

4 So I think the best I could figure out was we hit the ground
5 pretty much, like, nose on more or less, maybe (indiscernible) off
6 a little bit to the left. And then I think we just kind of plowed
7 forward I guess at an angle, and then we came to rest at some
8 point by basically flipping up and over was the best I could kind
9 of reconstruct [REDACTED]

10 [REDACTED]
11 [REDACTED] [REDACTED]
12 [REDACTED]
13 [REDACTED] [REDACTED] [REDACTED]
14 [REDACTED]
15 [REDACTED] [REDACTED]
16 [REDACTED] [REDACTED]
17 [REDACTED]
18 [REDACTED] [REDACTED]
19 [REDACTED]
20 [REDACTED] . [REDACTED]
21 [REDACTED]
22 [REDACTED]

23 You know, and from time to time, I would try to SOS, and I --
24 yeah, somewhere around there, I think it was quarter till 11:00,
25 11:00, somewhere in there, I was able to actually get that swipe

1 feature to work on the SOS for the inReach on my -- on the iPhone
2 app. And then I did get some texts back from their dispatch, and
3 then also Melissa had texted me the number for -- I think it was
4 actually Search and Rescue in Barrow. I'm not sure who I started
5 texting with at that point, [REDACTED]
6 [REDACTED] [REDACTED]. [REDACTED]
7 [REDACTED] But then they started --
8 communicated back to me that they were going to mobilize a
9 helicopter, and once that happened, it would be about an hour from
10 Barrow to our site.

11 [REDACTED] [REDACTED]
12 [REDACTED]
13 [REDACTED] [REDACTED]
14 [REDACTED]
15 [REDACTED]
16 [REDACTED]
17 [REDACTED] [REDACTED]
18 -- [REDACTED]
19 [REDACTED]
20 [REDACTED]

21 Yeah, so at that point -- I believe not that long after, I
22 had gotten a text saying the helicopter was on the way. And so I
23 just did my best to kind of keep my wits about me. [REDACTED]

24 [REDACTED]
25 [REDACTED] And yeah,

1 sat there for a while, walked around there for a bit, just stayed
2 warm. And then I saw the helicopter, yeah, maybe it was a quarter
3 after midnight or so.

4 They got out -- a few guys got out. They came over to me,
5 and I told them I was hurt, [REDACTED], but I could
6 walk. So I walked to the helicopter and got onboard when they
7 started to undress me, assess my wounds, [REDACTED],
8 and laid me down. [REDACTED]

9 [REDACTED]
10 [REDACTED]
11 [REDACTED]

12 And then I was taken directly to the emergency room at the
13 hospital where they did a great job. [REDACTED]

14 [REDACTED]
15 [REDACTED]

16 Yeah, so I think, yeah, as far as the details, that's -- I
17 think that's the best I can do. I remember everything really
18 vividly after we hit the ground, and yeah -- and also just that --
19 what we were doing the day before. But just in between when we
20 had decided to go back to camp, or our cabin, and in between
21 banking around to the left there to go back, and then the impact,
22 I can't piece it together.

23 Q. Yeah, no problem, Ben. Thank you. Are you -- do you need a
24 break? Or are you hanging in there?

25 A. Oh, that was good. It was actually, like -- anyway, thank

1 you. No, I'm hanging in there. It felt good to actually just try
2 to, like, try to say all of that out loud. So yeah, I appreciate
3 that. No, I'm good. I can keep going.

4 Q. Okay. I just had some follow up questions for you. And if
5 you can't remember, it's absolutely no problem. Do you have an
6 idea -- and you may have already said so, but do you have an idea
7 of when the accident happened time-wise?

8 A. Like the specific time on the clock?

9 Q. Yeah. The -- or in -- there about. So about what time you
10 think that the accident itself happened.

11 A. 10:00 -- I would say 10:00 p.m. Alaska Time, and that would
12 probably be plus or minus, like, 10 minutes or so.

13 Q. Okay.

14 A. Because I could go back, and I could look at when my first
15 message was to Melissa, and it -- that like -- there was -- like,
16 the main problem was I couldn't actually find my inReach. It was
17 somewhere there in the wreckage, but I couldn't actually find it.
18 And there was definitely a delay between when I would actually try
19 to send her a message with the app on the phone to when the
20 message actually sent, because I think it was kind of under the
21 plane, or like -- I don't know, it was just being like -- there
22 was some kind interference there.

23 So yeah, 10:00 p.m. plus or minus ten minutes is my best --
24 yeah, best guess.

25 Q. Yeah. No problem. And when you were banking -- when you had

1 decided to not land right before the accident, and you were in
2 that left bank, do you recall -- do you have a feeling for what
3 the ceiling was and what the visibility was at that time?

4 A. The visibility was -- yeah, the visibility was still -- it
5 seemed -- like, I don't -- I can't actually tell you
6 specifically --

7 Q. Sure.

8 A. -- at that bank. But once we were -- once I was on the
9 ground once we -- after he had crashed, and I could -- I mean, I
10 could see the old NARL cabin from the crash site, which is
11 probably, like, 4 miles away.

12 Q. Okay.

13 A. And then there is a lake with a bluff on it that's off to the
14 west, and it looks like a small hill. And I could see that as
15 well, and that's probably about 7 or 8 miles away from where we
16 crashed. So I could see both those landmarks for sure. I could
17 see the Borough cabin which was, yeah, probably within a quarter
18 to a half a mile to the south of me.

19 Q. Okay.

20 A. The ceiling, I don't -- it was overcast, and so I can't
21 really tell you the ceiling. But it didn't seem like it changed
22 much from when we initially had taken off there at around 8:00
23 p.m.

24 Q. Okay.

25 A. And I know when we had checked in Barrow -- I can't remember

1 the ceiling in Deadhorse at that time when we took off, but I know
2 in Barrow, I remember seeing it was over -- it was, like, 800 feet
3 maybe, or something like that --

4 Q. Okay.

5 A. -- at 8:00 p.m. But yeah, it just seemed like, yeah, the
6 conditions didn't change much throughout that couple-hour period.

7 Q. Okay. And do you remember what altitude you were at when you
8 were -- or as close to before the accident, do you remember what
9 altitude you were at when you were in that left turn?

10 A. I don't remember the altitude in the left turn, but I do
11 remember seeing 500 when we initially took -- like, just
12 knowing -- just kind of flying with Jim for so many years, I --
13 like I remember seeing 500 feet when -- after we had taken off
14 southwest of the old NARL cabin. And then I do remember seeing
15 400 feet as we were cruising.

16 We came down a little bit, and then I know for sure that we
17 did drop down as we were flying by the Borough cabin there to look
18 down at the conditions. But I didn't actually -- I don't -- yeah,
19 I have no -- I can't -- yeah, I don't know what our altitude was.

20 Q. Yeah, no problem.

21 A. I mean, if I could guess, it would probably would have been,
22 like, between 200 and 300 feet. Somewhere in there just based on
23 -- yeah, just based on looking down. Like I know that area so
24 well and could see the size of the cabin, and that would be my
25 best guess.

1 Q. Okay. Yeah. And do you remember anything being wrong with
2 the airplane mechanically? Was it running good? Would -- did Jim
3 express any concerns about any maintenance issues or anything with
4 the airplane?

5 A. No. He had no -- Jim didn't express any maintenance issues.
6 And it sounded good. The plane sounded fine engaged. I didn't
7 hear any sputter or anything like that with the engine. Yeah,
8 nothing sounded out of the normal.

9 Q. Okay. And I'm sure you're well aware of flat light
10 conditions, you know, where you have a hard time --

11 A. Yeah.

12 Q. Can -- are you aware of any of those types of conditions on
13 the flight?

14 A. Not on the flight, no.

15 Q. Okay.

16 A. Like on the tundra, you could definitely see, like,
17 vegetation sticking up, and you could see hummocks. And so there
18 was -- yeah, there were things to key in on, on the tundra for
19 sure, just to kind of break up that white-on-white on the ground.

20 Q. Right.

21 A. But on the lake itself, yeah, it would have been -- the flat
22 light conditions would have been -- could have been a worry on the
23 lake -- out on Teshekpuk Lake. Because it was basically just snow
24 and -- like ice covered by snow out there. So no -- yeah, no
25 objects on the ground surface that would break up that light on

1 the ground.

2 Q. Sure. And just for my benefit, I'm -- were the references,
3 like the tussocks sticking up, was that -- were those there when
4 you were making the left turn? And/or were those somewhere -- so
5 I guess my question is, in the left turn right before the
6 accident, is that where there was visible -- visual reference?
7 Or --

8 A. Yeah. There -- yeah, so we were coming along the -- yeah,
9 flying along the lakeshore. So the lake was off -- or the land
10 was off to the left, so off on Jim's side.

11 Q. Okay.

12 A. The lake was off on my side, on the right side.

13 Q. Okay.

14 A. There's a -- the cabin sits there. There's a small hill to
15 the east of the cabin, and definitely that was pretty wind-scoured
16 on top of that small hill, and so there was tussocks sticking up
17 there for sure. And so as we banked, we banked left over the
18 tundra there, so back on the land side. So off of Jim's wing,
19 he's -- like he would have seen the cabin, and yeah, just tussocks
20 presumably on the ground, yes.

21 Q. Okay. And then there was, recovered from the accident site,
22 a GPSMAP 296, a Garmin. Do you know if --

23 A. Yeah.

24 Q. -- Jim was using that?

25 A. He had -- he kept it mounted to the yoke.

1 Q. Okay.

2 A. Yeah. And so it was always -- like, basically when the plane
3 was on, it was always on.

4 Q. Okay.

5 A. And I believe it -- I believe he -- like, I believe he also
6 tracked with that as well.

7 Q. Okay.

8 A. And so I'm glad you guys were able to recover that. So there
9 might be some information in there in terms of like -- I don't
10 know if those tracks record speed and altitude, stuff like that.

11 Q. Yeah, they do. Depending on the settings in the GPS itself,
12 they do have the ability to have nonvolatile memory in them. So
13 that's why I was curious if you knew if he was using it.

14 A. Yeah, for sure, it -- yeah, it -- basically, he always had it
15 mounted there, center of the yoke. And yeah, as soon as the plane
16 was on, it was on.

17 Q. Okay. And then there was also a Garmin 62stc. It looked
18 more like one someone might use hiking. Do you know if that was
19 also on?

20 A. That is mine.

21 Q. Okay.

22 A. But that -- no, that was not on. It was -- well, actually,
23 so I had -- I -- like, I always travel with two GPSs, so I had two
24 with me. One was -- I can't remember the model numbers off of the
25 top of my head. One was maroon, and the other was more, like,

1 black and gray colored.

2 Q. Okay.

3 A. And so the one that's black and gray colored was not on. It
4 was in one of my bags.

5 Q. Okay.

6 A. But the one that was maroon was on. It was in my lap
7 actually.

8 Q. Okay.

9 A. But I don't believe I was tracking with that one. I always
10 just have it on me when we're flying around up there just -- I
11 always like being able to see on map, like, where we are. And
12 just -- it helps me as we're traveling.

13 Q. Sure. Okay. And then there was also recovered, something
14 that was labeled Stillwater Technologies on the outside of a -- it
15 looked like a plastic type case. Do you know what that is?

16 A. Yeah. That was the water level logger -- data logger box and
17 sensor that we picked up from the site that we landed at prior to
18 the crash, so the site that was to the southwest of the old NARL
19 cabin.

20 Q. Okay.

21 A. It's basically a small transducer that measures distance
22 between the sensor and an object. And so I had it mounted out
23 there to a pole so it measures the level of the lake.

24 Q. Okay.

25 A. And then it transmits the data via satellite.

1 Q. Okay. And can you -- the -- before the accident occurred,
2 can you tell me again the last stop before the accident, where you
3 guys departed from?

4 A. Yeah. Not sure how best to describe it. Like it -- are you
5 looking at a map by chance? Or --

6 Q. No, I'm not. But the -- maybe it would be easier, if you
7 wouldn't mind, if you have the ability in the next hand -- 4 or 5
8 days, 6 days, could you send me the coordinates for where you
9 left?

10 A. Oh, yeah. I can easily do that. I know exactly where we
11 were.

12 Q. Okay.

13 A. It's just -- it's hard for me to describe it.

14 Q. That'll be fine.

15 A. Let me try to describe though really quickly.

16 Q. Okay.

17 A. So if you look at a map of Teshekpuk Lake, and you look to
18 the northwest corner, there's, like, a long sandy spit or beach
19 that comes to a point of land, and then it's separated by this
20 small little channel that forms the Mayoriak River. That's the
21 outlet for the lake. And so the sensor was down there, and so we
22 landed on the west side on that point of land actually and then
23 taxied back over to where the sensor was.

24 Q. Okay. And do you know about what time you departed there?

25 A. Yeah, I could figure it out for you.

1 Q. Okay.

2 A. I know I texted my wife. Kind of like my protocol is to
3 where -- when we always landed at a location, I would just -- I
4 would send her an inReach message. And so I can check back, and I
5 can look at the archive of those messages and tell you within
6 probably -- I think we were on the ground for about 10 minutes
7 there. So within 10 minutes, I can tell you when we left there.

8 Q. Okay. That would be terrific. And no hurry. Any time in
9 the next week if you're able. That would be terrific.

10 A. I mean, one thing I can do if it might be helpful is I can
11 -- I think there's a way for me to export out my inReach.

12 Q. I was going to ask, yeah.

13 A. I -- messages, and also the track as, like, a KML Google
14 Earth-type file. I'll -- let me try to do that for you, and I can
15 email that to you.

16 MR. BANNING: Okay. Yeah, if you could, that would be
17 absolutely -- that would be very appreciative (verbatim). I think
18 what I'll do is I'll see if Dustin has any questions for you.

19 MR. HOPKINS: Thanks, Brice. Ben, just a couple. And you
20 have to excuse me, because I -- even though Brice is recording, I
21 still take notes. It causes me to come up with questions.

22 BY MR. HOPKINS:

23 Q. At the cabin, you had mentioned that you were at the North
24 Slope Borough cabin is where the accident occurred. Is it pretty
25 flat there? What's the terrain like around the cabin?

1 A. So the cabin sits in an old lakebed. So it's a dried lakebed
2 that is -- I would call it essentially completely flat.

3 Q. Okay.

4 A. Where we hit, there is a small hill just to the east of the
5 cabin that maybe rises up above that flat area by about maybe 15
6 feet or so.

7 Q. So just a rolling hill, a small hill?

8 A. Yeah, very small. Like little -- it's, like, just kind of a
9 little piece of a remnant rolling hill.

10 Q. Okay.

11 A. And then, yeah, where we impacted the ground, and yeah,
12 pretty much all around that kind of half a mile buffer around that
13 spot, it's -- yeah, I would call it flat. Completely flat.

14 Q. Okay. I have this Teshekpuk Lake pulled up, but it doesn't
15 show me any altitudes or anything. I just did a quick Google
16 search when -- prior to getting on here. How many times on the
17 cabin that you were intending to land at, before the accident, how
18 many times did you circle that cabin? Just once?

19 A. Yeah. We just -- we didn't even circle it once. We flew by
20 it.

21 Q. Okay.

22 A. We flew by it and decided not to try to go there, and just to
23 -- kind of just go back to camp at that point. So it was
24 basically flying by once and then banking was all that we did.

25 Q. So when you were flying by it, it was on Jim's side, the

1 cabin, you said, right?

2 A. Correct. Yeah, we were on -- we would have been favoring
3 just a little bit out onto the lake itself, and then the shoreline
4 was right there down below on Jim's side. Yes.

5 Q. Okay.

6 A. As we were flying --

7 Q. And so when you turned out --

8 A. -- west to east.

9 Q. Go ahead, sir. West to east?

10 A. No, that would have been as we were flying from west to east.

11 Q. West to east, okay. And so it would have been on his left
12 side then?

13 A. Yes. Correct, yeah.

14 Q. Okay. And then you turned -- he turned left kind of over the
15 land then? Back over the mainland then where the cabin was --

16 A. Yeah. I remember --

17 Q. Right? Okay.

18 A. I remember going by that small hill, because I was looking
19 out to -- out his window as well, to the left. I remember going
20 over the small hill just a little bit past the cabin, and then
21 that's when we started to bank back -- yeah, back over the land to
22 the north of Teshekpuk Lake, back over the landward side.

23 Q. Okay. Quick question. On the morning of the accident, what
24 time did you guys get up?

25 A. I could also look that up for you guys, because I would have

1 texted my wife in the morning when we woke up. I believe around
2 9:00 a.m.

3 Q. Okay. Around 9:00.

4 A. Yeah.

5 Q. And Brice has already asked you about the visibility during
6 -- prior to the accident. And then real quick, prior to impact,
7 do you remember Jim -- he -- I'm sure he was just in his left turn
8 looking out the side window probably. Did he grab for anything
9 out of the ordinary? Do you remember anything like that, that
10 would take --

11 A. No.

12 Q. -- his concentration off? Okay.

13 A. Nothing like that. But that's when, like, I don't know. I
14 just, like, can't -- I can't put -- it's kind of frustrating to me
15 that I can't piece that aspect together. But yeah, like, nothing
16 -- so basically I remember going into the bank, and I remember
17 banking, and then the next thing I remember was the impact. And
18 yeah, there's nothing in there in between that, that I can come up
19 with right now actually. Like --

20 Q. Okay.

21 A. But yeah, it's nothing that -- yeah, nothing. That's what I
22 can recollect.

23 MR. HOPKINS: Okay. Well, Ben, again, I appreciate your
24 time, sir. And thank you. I have no further questions, Brice.

25 MR. BANNING: Okay.

1 MR. JONES: Yeah. Thank you, Dustin.

2 MR. BANNING: Yeah. And I don't -- is there anything, Ben,
3 that you think we need to know that we didn't ask?

4 MR. JONES: I can't think of it. Yeah, I think -- I guess,
5 thanks for letting me just kind of, like, replay that all out
6 loud.

7 MR. BANNING: Well, I --

8 MR. JONES: That's the first time I've done that. And I
9 can't -- anyway, no, I can't think of anything that --

10 MR. BANNING: Okay.

11 MR. JONES: Yeah, no. Nothing.

12 MR. BANNING: Okay. And so with that, I will go off the
13 record at 1457.

14 (Whereupon, at 2:57 p.m., the interview was concluded.)
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CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the attached proceeding before the

NATIONAL TRANSPORTATION SAFETY BOARD

IN THE MATTER OF: FATAL CRASH OF CESSNA A185F N5454E
OPERATED BY JIM WEBSTER'S FLYING
SERVICE, NEAR NUISQUT, ALASKA,
ON MAY 14, 2020
Interview of Benjamin Jones

ACCIDENT NO.: ANC20LA046

PLACE: Via telephone

DATE: May 22, 2020

was held according to the record, and that this is the original,
complete, true and accurate transcript which has been transcribed
to the best of my skill and ability.



Christy Wilson
Transcriber