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Date: September 14, 2023.

Subject: ANC23FA074

Contact: Bruce Warber

Bruce Warber [REDACTED] – Owner of Airplane

Mr Warber has been the owner of the accident airplane, N109T since the 1970's, and is the owner of Neitz Aviation Inc., the Part 135 operation that it was flying under.

He has known the pilot, Mr Peltola, since he was 11, so long that he considers him a family member. Mr Pelota has flown the accident airplane many times; he was a natural pilot. They kept in touch as Mr Peltola grew up, went through school and college. He had a busy career but in later years talked about taking over the Neitz Aviation operation.

Mr Warber stopped flying in recent years, and they continued to talk about transferring the company, with the first step being that Mr Peltola should first join the operation in an official capacity as the chief pilot¹. He felt that selling to Mr Pelota would be an obvious step, because it would be like keeping the business in the family.

Mr Peltola was added to the operating certificate and took his Part 135 checkride in the accident airplane a few weeks before the accident. It was his understanding that due to the high-profile position held by Mr Peltola's wife, the maintenance shop that performed the last annual inspection of the airplane thoroughly prior to the checkride, and this was reviewed by FAA before the checkride. During that time, a series of paperwork discrepancies were found, specifically some STC's were installed but had

¹ Neitz Aviation is a single pilot operation.

not been documented. These modifications were then inspected, and retroactively added to the logbooks, with 337's filed with the FAA.

For the accident operation, Mr Peltola planned to transport five hunters and one guide from St Marys to the accident location near Holly Cross. He took three hunters on the first day, and two hunters and a guide on the second day.

The following day he got call that they had shot a moose. He flew to the site and removed half of the meat, and the accident occurred on the second outbound leg with the remaining meat.

For each departure out of St Marys, he had over two hours of fuel onboard. For the accident flight, Mr Warber confirmed that for the final outbound leg the left tank was filled to $\frac{1}{2}$ capacity, and the right $\frac{3}{4}$.



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Date: September 12-19, 2023.

Subject: ANC23FA074

Contact: Travis Hopkins

Mr Hopkins is based out of Aledo, Texas and was visiting Alaska for a hunting trip. He arrived in Anchorage, on an American Airlines flight on September 8th, and flew to Holy Cross via a private charter on the morning of September 10.

The hunting group consisted of six, with one a guide, and another and additional hunter that arrived September 11th and was not directly related to Mr. Hopkins' party. The pilot initially flew the guide out to his camp around 1:30 PM on September 10th and then returned to take Mr. Hopkins and approximately half of their camping gear and supplies. Approximately, 5 minutes after his take off from Holy Cross, the pilot noticed the fuel being unbalanced between the wings. Instead of risking not having the appropriate fuel supply, the pilot opted to return to Holy Cross and double checked fuel levels. After landing back at Holy Cross, the pilot realized that one of the fuel caps had not been put back in place. It turned out that one of the ground crew had tried to stop the pilot before take-off because they had found the gas cap.

The cap was put back on and they departed again. After delivering Mr. Hopkins to the camp, the pilot returned and picked up Mr. Hopkins' hunting partner and the 2nd half of their camp gear. Both flights were without incident, but both landings did have substantial bounces. Following these flights, it appeared that the pilot finished flying for that day.

The following day (11th) they killed a Moose and dressed it and got the meat moved to the edge of the landing strip. On the 12th, they contacted the pilot using their inReach devices, and he arrived about 1530 to take the first load of meat. They helped him load it into the airplane, and he gave specific instructions for distributing it around the cabin for weight and balance purposes. It was all tied down. The departure was

uphill to the north, on what the pilot described as the “nicest” runway. He stated he was typically able to land in any direction at that location and it was one of the nicest runways that he gets to land on in the mountains. The departure was uneventful, and the airplane turned right shortly after takeoff and climbed around their adjacent hilltop to the right (east).

The pilot returned at approximately 1940 to take the second and final load. In addition to the ham, shoulder, ribs, and trim bag, there was also an additional 20 lbs of trim meat, a 40-50lb bag of backstrap and tenderloins, and the moose antlers. Mr. Hopkins estimated that this was approximately 50-70 pounds of meat than the previous flight.

The pilot tied antlers to the right wing strut, cupped outwards and then carefully tied into place with non-stretch paracord to ensure they didn’t shift in mid-flight and that they would not impede the control cables that ran nearby. The ham was then loaded vertically behind the pilot’s seat. The pilot commented that most pilots do not tie/secure the ham vertically, but he likes to do so, to keep the weight as far forward as possible. The ribs and one smaller bag of meat were placed on the floor up against and behind the ham. The last front shoulder was placed in the belly storage and a small bag of trim meat was placed on top of the shoulder. Both were far forward in the compartment. There was no additional effort made to secure either piece/bag of meat in its original position. The airplane appeared to be more heavily loaded than the flight before and although they did not have any scales, the approximate total weight of the meat was 530 lbs, and consisted of 180 lbs hind quarter, 120 lbs. front shoulder, 100 lbs. rib pack, and a 40 and 25 lbs. mixed pack, and the antlers which were about 65 lbs.

The pilot stated that he had performed fuel calculations and estimated he would be right at his reserve fuel levels by the time he returned back to Holy Cross airport.

The pilot discussed the weather, and the group noted that while the runway winds were generally calm and out of the north, there were intermittent gusts from random directions. More specific winds were discussed that had previously (3-4 hours earlier) been experienced from a small hill/ridge top approximately 800 yards southwest of the landing strip. These winds were strong and gusting out of the northeast but were erratic and often out of the east and south east at times. However, when Mr. Hopkins had come down from the hill and entered the shallow valley that slowly went uphill towards the runway the wind seemed to disappear.

At the time of the take-off, the winds had died down on the runway and were just a slight northerly breeze. The airplane departed on the runway to the north at 2046. The ground roll was slightly longer than before, and the airplane appeared to be a bit more “labored” than the previous flight. As the airplane reached the end of the runway,

it pitched up and took off. Right after takeoff, the tail appeared to drop, and the airplane made a sharp right turn, much steeper than the first takeoff turn. It flew out of sight behind the hill in the same direction as before but at a lower altitude.

The group all cheered because they couldn't believe that all the meat was flown out, and they could continue hunting. Just seconds later, Mr. Hopkins hunting partner recalled hearing a sputter sound and then silence. He stated, "Something just happened". They could no longer hear an engine sound but also did not hear a crash.

Mr. Hopkins then ran fast to the top of the hill where he last spotted the tail of the airplane while it was banking right. The wreckage was facing back in the direction of the takeoff runway.

Mr. Hopkins found the pilot still conscious in the front seat, but he had sustained facial injuries. Fuel was leaking from the wings, and the front end of the airplane was crushed. He unbuckled the pilots lap belt (he did not appear to be wearing the shoulder harness) and removed him from the airplane. Apart from facial injuries, they could not find any obvious evidence of other trauma. He removed him from the airplane.

[In a follow up email dated September 25, 2023 Mr Hopkins stated:

"When I removed his lap belt, I didn't remove shoulder harnesses from around/ over his shoulders. I can't recall if I removed the shoulder strap loops from the lap belt latch. It all happened so quickly and I wanted to get him out as fast as possible. I guess there is a possibility that they were on, but super loose, but his arms and chest were 100% free from any restraints when I got to him."]

They stabilized him by the airplane, covered him in multiple blankets, and set their heater upwind to keep him warm. He was talking and did not appear to be in pain; however, he became less responsive over the next two hours until he became non-responsive and they could no longer find a pulse.

Immediately following the accident, Mr. Hopkins used his the SOS feature of his inReach device to contact the emergency services. The Air National Guard arrived about 1:30-2:00.