



Passenger Interview

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NTSB Accident Number: CEN12FA088 – N6485L, Piper PA-31 at New Orleans, LA

On November 30, 2011, the investigator-in-charge interviewed Mr. Jaime Lopez Valdez at the accident scene at Lakefront Airport (NEW), New Orleans, Louisiana; and in an office at the Orleans Levee Board Police Department.

Present and participating were Inspector Albert Terry and Inspector Richard S. Gordon of the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) Flight Standards District Office in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. Assisting in the interview as an interpreter was Mr. Alberto Melendez, New Orleans, Louisiana.

Mr. Lopez Valdez told me he is 45-years old and is a resident of Guadalajara, Jalisco, Mexico. He had a visa to enter the United States and he showed an official California identification card with an address in Wasco, California. He manages the family's farm in Guadalajara, but his main business in the United States is to purchase automobiles here, take them to Mexico, and resell them for-profit.

He said he had never before owned an airplane, but he bought N6485L from Mr. Richard Graham in Calexico, California. He intended to take the airplane to Fort Lauderdale and was going to resell the airplane for a profit there. He was unsure of the prospective purchaser's name, but he thought the potential purchaser was Mr. Luis Perez.

Mr. Lopez Valdez did not know the pilot and had never met him before, but Mr. Graham had recommended the pilot as a person to ferry the aircraft the airplane from California to Fort Lauderdale. Mr. Lopez Valdez was going to pay the pilot for his services at the end of the trip.

Mr. Lopez Valdez was the only passenger in N6485L at the time of the accident and was seated in the right cockpit seat. The pilot was seated in the left cockpit seat. Mr. Lopez Valdez does not speak any English, and the pilot did not speak any Spanish.

Mr. Lopez Valdez said he was not a pilot and had never before flown an airplane, but in the past he had watched other pilots fly when he was riding as passenger.

Mr. Lopez Valdez told me:

1. The airplane took off from Calexico, California, about 0600 on the morning of the accident.
2. That day they had landed several times for fuel, one time near Albuquerque, where they ate lunch at Wendy's.
3. They next landed at Deming, New Mexico.
4. Their last fuel stop was at Stephenville, Texas.
5. He did not know what the next fuel stop was, but the GPS showed 30 minutes to go.
6. Their eventual destination was Fort Lauderdale, Florida.
7. About 25 minutes before the crash landing he noticed that the pilot was unresponsive and he tried to stir him.
8. Mr. Lopez Valdez briefly tried to do CPR (cardio pulmonary resuscitation), but the pilot did not respond and never regained consciousness.
9. The airplane was out-of-control and Mr. Valadez Lopez tried to take control.
10. During all of that time the pilot was completely incapacitated and unconscious.
11. He didn't know what to do and it took the microphone and was talking in Spanish over the radio asking "help help", but no one answered.
12. His legs were shaking, he was afraid, and he talked to God and asked him for help.
13. Mr. Lopez Valdez then used a small toy airplane to demonstrate how the airplane had been out of control.
14. He maneuvered the toy airplane to show about 80 degrees nose up and about 80 degrees nose down and he banked the toy airplane to the right and left side about 45 degrees several times.
15. He said he didn't know how, but somehow he was able to pull the airplane out of the dive and to keep the wings level.
16. It was dark and he saw the bright lights of a city, which he later found out was New Orleans.
17. He decided to try to steer the airplane towards that city.

18. He also saw the darkness of a large lake on the north side of that city, which he identified on a map as Lake Ponchartrain.
19. He did not want to crash into a house so he was moving the airplane towards the large dark area on the edge of the lake.
20. He later found the dark area was the New Orleans Lakefront Airport.
21. He lowered the landing gear before the airplane crashed.
22. When the firefighters arrived he was outside the airplane and he was walking around crying.
23. He told the firefighters that the pilot had died.
24. He was very distraught and the paramedics took Mr. Lopez Valdez to the hospital.
25. He said that somehow, with the help of God, he was not seriously injured.

(end)