



NATIONAL TRANSPORTATION SAFETY BOARD

Central Region

Record of Telephone Conversation

Person Interviewed: Trevor Thompson - Pilot

Date: June 22, 2017

Subject: – CEN17LA231

- He is a contract pilot who was hired by AirSign.
- Planned to fly 2 flights for a total of 3 hours of flight time. Needed to refuel once.
- Took off from private field east of the US Open.
- Carried 4-15-gallon propane tanks in the airship.
- Obtained a weather briefing which was better than what was forecast. Used Foreflight and several ballooning weather sights. Also, checked weather prior to 2nd flight.
- Ground crew of 3 people.
- Departed about 0830 for the first flight, which was routine and normal.
- First flight was about 2 hrs long.
- Target altitude was 1,000'. Flew between 800' and 1,200'.
- Most of the flight was west of the airstrip and east of the golf course.
- Saw car on runway and was told it was the police investigating someone who threatened to shoot the airship down because it was disturbing his livestock.
- Found out where farmer lived and made sure to stay away from the property.
- Landed to refuel. Off loaded 3 propane tanks and took on 2 full tanks before second flight.
- Shortly after takeoff on 2nd flight, the wind strengthened so he decided to come in to land.
- Decided to use a 50' tether drop line, but was unable to use the line because it was tangled up on itself and wouldn't reach the ground.
- On the 2nd attempt to land, he caught a "small" thermal which took him up to 500'.
- Starting to descend on the other side of the thermal.
- Attempted to use the vent, (normally used for fine tuning altitude). The vent jammed and went off its rail. So he wasn't able to use the vent.
- Heard a loud pressurize explosion, looked up through plexiglass vent panel and saw one envelope panel missing. Heard a second explosion and saw another panel missing.
- Envelope was losing air extremely fast.
- Emergency descent – isolate manifolds (one at feet and one behind him at the tanks.) He was in a 5-point restraint and would have had to get out of the harness to reach the manifold behind him which he wasn't going to do, so he shut off the manifold that he could reach by his feet.

- Descending rapidly. Part of the envelope caved in on the burners which were still burning the residual fuel.
- Fire spread very fast.
- Wearing Nomex suit. Plastic dripping into gondola. Leaned forward to protect face and eyes, which resulted in the burns he received on his back and neck.
- No control and no way to slow the rapid decent rate.
- Gondola impacted the ground hard, but in a level attitude.
- Envelope so burned that it didn't cover him in the gondola and he was able to get out.
- Crawled about 25' away from the wreckage. Then continued to crawl when he noticed the high flames. Heard Matt, his crew chief, calling his name and although he couldn't stand, he was able to get high enough in the tall wheat, so Matt could find him.
- Matt pulled him further away and they laid on the ground, in fear of the propane tanks exploding.
- Heard 2 explosions.
- First responders arrived very quickly.

Pamela S Sullivan
National Transportation Safety Board
Air Safety Investigator



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- He had some of this logbook records in the airship with him, but he also had an electronic copy of all his flight times which he will forward to me.
- He flew thermal airships for two other companies in addition to AirSign
- He had two other occurrences when flying airships. One was in New York (Long Island area) which was a precautionary landing. The other one was an off-field landing in Philadelphia which was due to an engine failure.
- Clarified that the vent panel jammed when he tried to open it and he couldn't open it during the flight. This happens occasionally and he typically just puts the panel back on the tracks once he is on the ground.
- There was a banner on both sides of the envelope.
- He sits in the right seat when flying the airship.
- The tear panel on the top of the envelope runs from ½ way back on the top of the airship all the way back to the tail. When he pulls the line, it starts separating from the tail forward.
- When he heard the tearing he looked up and a panel just forward of the tear panel was missing.

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Person Interviewed: Trevor Thompson - Pilot

Date: July 5, 2017

Subject: – CEN17FA231

Todd Davis visited with Trevor on this date and asked the following questions on behalf of the IIC.

1 – Q - Was the airship equipped with an rudder steering assist system?

A - Yes, works very well

2 – Q - The manual references an auto heat system. Was he using this or manually burning during the landing process? When encountering the thermal?

A - Trevor does not use the auto heat system, prefers to control manually, he said he likes the “feel”.

3- Q - What was the last envelope temps and pressure that he recalls and at what point was this?

A - He does not know the actual temp but said it would have been cooling during the ascent by the thermal as he did not operate the burners during that time. Pressure was in the green during the whole time. He mentioned that during the heat cycles it is virtually impossible to over pressurize the envelope since it has two pressure relief valves that exhaust excess pressure automatically albeit slowly. They could not exhaust a sudden pressure spike though. He said the pressure in the envelope may have spiked but he did not notice it on the gage as his attention was elsewhere.

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Record of Telephone Conversation

Person Interviewed: Matthew Schmidt – Crew Chief

Date: June 16, 2017

Subject: – CEN17LA231

- Their pilots are all contract pilots.
- They keep a copy of the aircraft records on the airship, but the originals are in Florida.
- The airship made an uneventful 2-hour flight earlier in the day. Two hours is about the normal flight time.
- Trevor landed and they fueled the tank in the gondola and switched out the propane tanks. The airship carries 3 propane tanks. They operate of two of them and the third one is an emergency spare. The tanks are mounted behind the pilot seat.
- Trevor took off around 1100 and radioed he was coming back in because the wind was too strong.
- They use several websites to determine the wind conditions. They are concerned about the winds aloft more so than the surface wind. They use a rule of thumb that 10 mph about the max that they operate in, because if the wind is higher, they just end up fighting the wind conditions as the airship has a max speed of 20 mph.
- Trevor got to near the treeline that bordered the airstrip and the wind was pushing the airship away, but he was making slow progress.
- The airship was about 500 ft agl, when he saw it collapse. He did not see any tears in the envelope.

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Person Interviewed: Patrick Walsh – CEO AirSign

Date: June 16, 2017

Subject: – CEN17LA231

- He is the CEO and majority investor in AirSign.
- They have 2-envelopes and one gondola.
- There are only a couple thermal airships in the US.
- Gefa-Flug sold the company to Impact Aero (Javier Merino Escamilla) in Mexico. He wasn't sure about the relationship between Javier and Cameron.
- They replaced the engine in October 2016.
- The airship remained registered in the UK because if they registered it in the US, it would have an experimental airworthiness certificate and they couldn't use it for hire. The US does not have a classification for the thermal airship. This is also why Trevor has a CAA issued UK pilot certificate for the thermal airship.
- There are only a couple people in the US who are certified to fly the thermal airship. Trevor is one of them and he is highly sought after.
- Trevor worked as a contract pilot. He is not an employee of AirSign.
- Crispen Williams is a CAA employee who would come to the US to do the inspections on their airship.
- Mr. Walsh provided contact info for Crispen Williams and David Sullivan.
- David Sullivan is a DAR in Atlanta who is familiar with thermal airships.

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