

Accident Number: CEN18FA386

Accident Date: September 24 2018

Pilot statement: Bruce Schulte

Overview: The accident aircraft was one of two planes scheduled to leave Lake Hood and travel to separate, unimproved strips located in adjacent river drainages on the west side of the Alaska Range. The second aircraft (N1748R) was flown by me. The flights were scheduled to depart at 9:00am but were slightly delayed as we gathered additional weather information for the trip.

Preflight:

Area forecasts suggested that wind in the area would be increasing throughout the day. There was no undue pressure to launch other than a belief that the winds would be picking up later in the day and that an earlier pickup would probably mean a smoother ride. Both aircraft were picking up hunting guides and no one involved seemed to place any particular urgency on when they got picked up.

08:10am Received a text message from the Duty Officer (Tony Bannock) relaying a PIREP from Rob Jones at Big River (near my destination) that the weather was “good on that side but probably going to be rough” – suggesting turbulence due to winds.

08:13am Received a second text message relaying another PIREP from Bob Fithian (Dave's destination) indicating that conditions were 30-40 knots and low visibility.

09:15 (approx.) We received a phone call from Bob Fithian. Dave took the call and said that Bob's update was that wind had decreased to around 20 knots. Dave decided that was acceptable so he prepared to launch.

I decided to go as well, though I waited a little while (about 15 minutes) to let Dave get out ahead of me. We had two other aircraft preparing for later departures (10:00am) and I planned to offer a PIREP for them once airborne. One was to go to Rainy Pass Lodge (along the route that Dave and I were planning to take) and the other was going to Donkey Creek Lake (northwest of Skwentna).

Flight:

09:40am As I prepared to takeoff I heard Dave asking (over our company frequency) for someone to have a look at the web cams and give him a report – apparently, he was seeing some dark clouds ahead of him that caused some concern.

I elected to takeoff with the expectation that we might both end up returning to base if the weather was unsuitable. I did not hear what was said about the web cams as I was on tower frequency for the next few minutes.

09:45am As I cleared Anchorage airspace, I spoke to Dave over the radio and he seemed to feel that conditions ahead were not as dire as he had previously feared and he was proceeding.

I flew northwest from Point McKenzie – roughly the same route that Dave had flown 15 minutes ahead of me. As I crossed the Susitna River I encountered a layer of cloud to the south which rolled over the

top of Mt. Susitna and Beluga Mountain, tapered off at an altitude of roughly 1,000 feet and ended on a line parallel to and approximately 2 miles south of the Yentna River. I flew along the edge of that layer at approximately 1,500-2,000' MSL. Flight visibility in that area was estimated 10-15 miles in rain and mist.

10:12am I radioed back to our other pilot, Kole Van Treese that his route to Donkey Creek Lake looked acceptable and suggested he stay to the north side of the Yentna River where there was no low-level cloud cover. We also discussed his load and I recommended that he take no more than 500 pounds at a time and to transfer any more in separate loads over to nearby Hewitt Lake (a much larger lake west of Skwentna). Conditions along his intended route were significantly better – estimated 10-15 miles visibility with ceilings 2,000'-3,000' at the time I was flying past.

10:14am Dave was now further up the Skwentna River - roughly abeam Finger lake and he commented over the radio that we should probably hold Dale Olsen (who was waiting to launch for Puntilla Lake / Rainy Pass Lodge). I concurred and texted Dispatch to hold Dale for the time being.

10:17am I reached a point on the Skwentna River that we refer to as "The Canyon" – a common choke-point for bad weather (low ceilings / visibility) just downriver from the confluence with the Talachulitna River. I radioed Dave and asked him what route he had taken past there. He said he had found an open corridor and flew through it. I turned away initially, moved to the west and found slightly better conditions so I proceeded onward. Flight visibility there was 2-3 miles in rain and mist. Ceiling variable.

10:18am I let Dave know that I was proceeding and I then commented that the conditions could well be worse on our return. Dave laughed and said conditions could also be much better – that I should just be more positive. I agreed and then added that the rain we were flying in might well reduce the moisture in the clouds and improve visibility and cloud definition after a while. We briefly discussed our shared impression that conditions were changing quickly in specific areas known to be choke points.

10:25am (approx..) I overheard Dave talking to someone at Rainy Pass Lodge. I could only hear his side of the conversation but it sounded like he was getting a weather report from the Lodge.

10:30am (approx..) I had been following the right-hand side of the Skwentna River for several miles but left that drainage and continued overland toward Finger lake in the hopes that I could get around a body of cloud that had formed near the confluence of the Hayes and Skwentna Rivers.

10:32am (approx..) I radioed to Dave to ask if he had stayed with the riverbed or left it to get around the weather. I received no response and assumed he had gone out of radio range into Rainy Pass.

10:33am I rejoined the Skwentna River and continued upriver – climbing from approximately 1,200' MSL to 2,000' MSL near a lake known locally as "Helicopter Lake". There was a significant cloud buildup over the Happy River westward (my intended route) so I continued climbing to approximately 2,800' MSL to see if I could find better conditions but saw only indefinite, mixed layers through a veil of poor visibility. The ceiling at that point precluded climbing any higher.

10:43am I initially descended and began to backtrack but then climbed up to approximately 2,900' MSL as I flew over near the mouth of Portage Creek. Local weather patterns sometimes allowed passage from that direction when the direct route up the Happy River was impassable. On this day, the

alternate route also looked impassable so I decided that I had exhausted all reasonable options and would return to Lake Hood. I proceeded to retrace my route back down the Skwentna River toward Anchorage.

11:00am (approx..) I exchanged a few radio calls with Kole Van Treese – flying our 206 on floats – who by now was on his way up the Yentna River to Donkey Creek Lake. It sounded like the flight conditions he was experiencing were essentially unchanged from when I recommended he launch. I also spoke with the pilot of a helicopter at Skwentna airport who had a sling load. I assured him that I would stay on the east side of the river as I passed Skwentna so as to avoid a conflict.

11:10am I left the Skwentna River drainage and continued overland as it was a more direct route and would take me well away from the helicopter at Skwentna.

11:22am (approx..) I radioed Base that I had turned around and asked if there was anything else I could pickup on my way back to Lake Hood. I suggested a planned pickup at a nearby lodge but they weren't scheduled until later that day and would probably not be ready yet. I asked if Dave had made it to his destination and was told that his Spidertracks unit was not updating.

11:44am Landed back at Lake Hood and learned that Dave was overdue at his destination.

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