

NATIONAL TRANSPORTATION SAFETY BOARD

Office of Aviation Safety
Washington, D.C. 20594

May 28, 2020

Attachment 5 – Interview Summaries with Company Personnel

OPERATIONAL FACTORS

CEN20MA044



RECORD OF CONVERSATION

Shawn Etcher
Aviation Safety Investigator
Operational Factors Division

May 18, 2020

On Call: Mr. Charles Vincent, Shawn Etcher – NTSB, Emile Joseph – Mr. Vincent Representative

Representative: Emile Joseph – Attorney with Allen & Gooch

Time: 0909 CDT

Mr. Vincent stated that he had made many flights in the airplane and had owned it since December 2000, except for a short period of time. Additionally he has flown Cheyenne airplanes since the 1970s and was very familiar with the airplane. He also stated that it was an excellent airplane for handling and performance when operating close to maximum allowable weight. He never had any issues with the airplane.

When asked if they accomplished a weight and balance of the aircraft, he stated that they did and they used foreflight, which provided them with the Weight and Center of Gravity. He stated that the accident pilot was very conscientious with the distribution of the weight. He felt that was likely why he only departed with fuel in the nacelle tanks. He further provided that one of the passengers took a video when the accident flight was on the takeoff roll, which he clarified was about 1 to 2 seconds in length, and on that video he showed that the lady was in what he thought was the back seat. Which he stated, was the accident pilot's practice, to put the heavier passengers towards the front.

When asked how he got the video if it was taken during the takeoff roll, he stated that one of the passengers took the video and it uploaded to their iCloud account. After the accident they used another cellular phone to access the iCloud account when they saw the video. He stated that they provided that video to the Baton Rouge FAA office.

When asked what the handling characteristics were of the accident airplane with an aft center of gravity, he stated that he had not flown the Cheyenne when loaded aft of the aft center of gravity limits. He further provided that when he flew the Piper Navajo, he noted that if that airplane was loaded in a way to have the center of gravity at the aft limits or possibly even outside of the aft center of gravity limit that it was "not a comfortable feeling" when on an approach. But within the center of gravity envelope range it "felt great." He further provided that the accident airplane was equipped with 4-bladed propellers and because of the 4 bladed propellers it had a lot of torque on the engine, so he wanted to make sure they were well trained.

When asked about the training they received, he stated that they would have a “pretty good discussion;” however, the instructor varied what they talked about. They always went over regulations and different aircraft systems.

When asked if he could recall what was discussed in their most recent training event, he stated that they discussed the electrical system, and that training occurred in April of 2019. After they discussed the electrical system, they then went on to discuss regulations. During the flight portion of the training they did some single engine work, steep turns, and did some approaches.

When asked if he and Mr. Biggs always trained at the same time with the same instructor, he stated that most of the time they did there was a few times when he and the accident pilot would have trained with a different instructor and one time in the past he could recall the accident pilot training with a local instructor but the last 2 or 3 training events, they accomplished those together.

He further provided that during the flight portion of their training, they tended to practice the flight characteristics of the airplane. The importance to him was to give the accident pilot the most experience he could about the flight characteristics of the airplane. He recalled one time, in the early career of the accident pilot, the accident pilot and instructor went up on a flight. After they landed and discussed with Mr. Vincent what they had done, it was decided to go on an additional flight in order to conduct some additional training and familiarity with the airplane. On training events they always did single-engine work, slow flight, etc. He felt that single-engine work was the most important. He stated that there are two times if a pilot had an engine failure that the airplane would be a lot to handle and those two areas were on departure or on approach.

He went on to say that if an airplane had an engine failure and was flying on a single engine, with this propeller it had a lot of torque and that a pilot must be ready to handle it. He felt repetitive training was beneficial for a pilot in having the procedures of an engine failure well understood and the control of the airplane were very important.

When asked what the airplane’s normal climb rate was, he stated that the airplane would normally climb around 1700-1800 feet per minute, when the airplane speed was around 140 knots, but accelerating to about 160 knots. He further provided that when the airplane was at maximum weight the takeoff climb rate would be about the same. If the airplane had an engine failure, then he stated they might be able to obtain 300 feet per minute and in certain conditions, it might be able to climb at 400 feet per minute on a single engine.

When asked if they practiced single-engine work in simulated or actual instrument conditions, he replied that they always did their training and single-engine work in visual flight rules (VFR), they did not simulate instrument conditions. He went on to say that when they did their single engine training, they would always feather the propeller. He learned that procedure when he flew the airplane early in his flying career. He also added

that they would always do their single-engine work at a safe altitude, which was usually 5,000 feet or higher.

When asked about their flight training portion if they flew together or each went up individually, he stated that they both flew in the airplane at the same time, and he recalled that is what they did in during their recent training in April 2019. The instructor would be in the right front seat and then one of them would sit in the left front seat while the other, once they reached a safe altitude, would be between the two pilot seats so they could watch each other and learn. He felt that the training went “very well all the way around.” He felt confident in what the instructor was teaching, especially since they had used that same instructor for many years. He further stated that if he would have observed anything that did not seem correct or that needed worked on then they would have gone through the procedure again. He stated that the accident pilot had become a really good pilot with the airplane. He recalled that when the accident pilot was first getting checked out in the airplane, the suggestion was made to go back up and do some more single-engine work just so the accident pilot could get proficient. When they did single-engine work they feathered the propeller every time and it was their practice to do single-engine work every training event.

When asked if he the flight instruments installed on the airplane were a challenge to use, he stated that he did not think they were very challenging to use. He further stated that the accident pilot was involved in the installation of the flight instruments and helped determined what system they were going to install. He stated that the accident pilot was very meticulous and further provided that when they got the external APU connected they went over every aspect of it.

He further provided that when he and the accident pilot flew together, they would ask each other lots of questions about the airplane rather in order to keep each other proficient. He felt the Garmin system that was installed in the accident aircraft was an intuitive system once a pilot understood where everything was located on the screen. He further provided that the accident pilot really “enjoyed working with the flight panel.”

He was asked if he observed the accident pilot engage the autopilot soon after takeoff or if the accident pilot hand flew the airplane to a certain altitude. He stated that both he and the accident pilot felt that if a flight had an engine issue with the autopilot engaged a pilot may forget that they were not hand flying the airplane. He stressed and the accident pilot also agreed that they would normally hand fly the airplane to at least well above a safe altitude up to 2,000 feet and normally up to 5,000 feet. He did not think that the accident pilot would have had the autopilot engaged that early on the accident flight. They both would hand fly the airplane on a regular basis- and that he regular flew the aircraft to at least 5,000 feet. His practice was to also use the autopilot, when approaching an airport, until a point when he was set up for the approach, the airplane was established on the approach, and the flight was at or near the final approach fix. He had done a lot of approaches in the airplane and had conducted 2 in the past year down to 200 feet. He had heard that the accident pilot had also conducted approaches down to maybe as low as 300 feet last year, but he was not on board the flight when that had occurred. He further

provided that the accident pilot and him would have discussions about the performance of the airplane to make sure they each knew all they could with the airplane. He was “very confident with the [accident pilot’s] ability in the airplane.” Hand flying the airplane kept them proficient in flying instrument approaches in case the autopilot ever malfunctioned.

When asked to further describe their recent training event, he stated that they would simulate that they were on an IFR flight and if the autopilot worked, they would use it, as they would on a regular flight. They would also conduct a missed approach and set up for the next approach with the autopilot engaged so they could focus on setting up the approach correctly.

When asked if the autopilot had ever had any irregularities in the past, he reported that they had some minor glitches in the past but there were no issues with the autopilot at the time of the event. He could not recall when the last time they had any autopilot issues but they continuously practiced if it were inoperative so they would be proficient on flying instrument approaches.

When asked if he could recall who had conducted their most recent formal training, he stated that Mr. Blessing was the one they used for their formal training event. However, he further provided that he and the accident pilot were always conducting informal training with each other. He went on to say that when they flew together, they were always educating each other on the airplane. Sometimes they would educate each other on some of the systems, performance, or many other things associated with flying a flight. When they flew with each other they would always ask each other questions and as the accident pilot became more proficient in the airplane the accident pilot was teaching him also.

When asked about the accident pilot’s ability to fly the airplane, he stated that he already knew how to fly the airplane when he went for his checkride. Every trip they flew together they always had a lot of discussions about the aircraft. He wanted to make sure that the accident pilot’s ability allowed Mr. Vincent the confidence and comfort of putting his family on the airplane. He had that confidence with the accident pilot.

It was their habit that every flight they were conducting prior to departing the approach to return to the airport if necessary was always set up to come back and that was how they operated. If there was an issue that required them to return, they would have to activate the approach as it was all set up in the Garmin. He normally had the 530 programmed to come back to the airport.

When asked about his endorsements for training that was placed in his logbook, he stated that almost every time Mr. Blessing would endorse his logbook and also thought that the accident pilot used Mr. Blessing. He further provided that the last several times had been done with Mr. Blessing. The accident pilot had a habit to bring his logbook on his flights to keep it current. After the event, he went through his truck and his office to try and find his logbook but was unable to locate it. His most recent flight review was done with Mr. Blessing.

He further provided that, the accident pilot had a lot of involvement in the Cheyenne and wanted to be the very best that he could be at operating the airplane. The accident pilot also assisted with the maintenance of the airplane and knew the systems on the airplane “very well.” He further stated that it was “mind boggling” to him how this event could have occurred.

When asked if there was anything, he could add to assist this investigation, he stated that there were no issues with the airplane departing. He had mentioned to the IIC that there was an issue with the pitot system went out on the left-hand side. There were only 2 people on the airplane at the time. The accident pilot had the one passenger to assist him. The passenger reported to Mr. Vincent that the accident pilot took it in “stride” and “did not lose his cool at all”. When they started down for the approach the pitot system on the left-side came back. He thought that event occurred in 2017 but could not recall a specific date. The accident pilot, on that flight, had his passenger call out the airspeed indications that were on the right side of the cockpit, and that he had hand flown the approach. The pitot on the right side was still working which was why the passenger was able to call out the airspeed indication.

He has thought and asked lots of questions about this event and he finds it hard to believe that the accident pilot would have “lost it.”

Ended at 1022 CDT

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15 Recurrent training per FAR Part 91.

~~24~~ 13 Step turns, Engine out, Emergency &

Normal / go down.

705



National Transportation Safety Board

Office of Aviation Safety – Central Region

Interview Summary: Wade Berzas – CEN20MA044

Date: February 12, 2020

Location: Lafayette, Louisiana

Interviewers: Jennifer Rodi NTSB, Denver, Colorado

Interviewee: Wade Berzas

During the Interview, Mr. Berzas stated the following:

- Mr. Berzas had been with the company for about 9 years. He was the Vice President of Sales and was responsible for managing the sales and marketing team
- He had flown with the pilot 8-10 times over the last few years. The flight was provided by the company and he was not charged for this flight to the game.
- He did not recall any past issues with the airplane or the pilot; he was not concerned about safety of operations
- He recalled one flight from Houston to Lafayette where the flight was diverted north around weather; the flight was turbulent but was otherwise not remarkable. It was later provided by the passenger that the flight took place on March 14, 2017 and was from KIWS to KLFT. It was believed that the pitot tube froze over during this flight.
- Mr. Berzas and the other passengers arrived at the airport on the morning of the accident; he did not recall what time they arrived
- They were going to fly to Atlanta for the LSU game; they intended on returning that evening after the game
- When they arrived at the hangar, the airplane was outside on the ramp
- Mr. Berzas stated that he sat in the aft, forward-facing seat on the left side of the airplane. The other male passenger sat in front of him on the left side. The two female passengers were in the right-side forward and aft-facing seats. The younger male passenger was seated in the co-pilot seat
- The toilet was in the rear center seat and coats were piled on top of the seat. A cooler with ice and beverages was loaded in the baggage compartment; he was not aware of any other loaded luggage as it was a day trip.
- Mr. Berzas boarded the airplane and buckled his lap seatbelt. He assumed that the other passengers buckled their belts but does not recall directly. He stated that the pilot did not provide a safety briefing prior to the flight.

- There was nothing out of the ordinary that morning; everyone was excited for the game; they had just met Carley for the first time and were getting acquainted
- The engine start, taxi, and takeoff roll were completely normal; nothing was out of the ordinary based upon his previous flights
- The takeoff roll and rotation seemed completely normal
- Once the airplane was up in the air, it felt as he had experienced before, the airplane pitched up like the pilot was trying to get above or over the clouds
- When asked to clarify or elaborate he stated that sometimes the pilot would climb hard to get above the clouds; the pilot would takeoff, stabilize the airplane, and then climb aggressively
- There was a bit of a jolt or pitching moment and the male passenger in front of him stated something to the effect that they were going up
- He remarked that it was a harder jerk or jolt than he was used to; he looked out at that point and noted that they were in the clouds. He also clarified that there were no abnormal sounds, just a harder than normal pitching movement
- After a few moments, the same passenger remarked “we are going down people”
- At that moment Mr. Berzas looked out the window and saw a glimpse of the ground for a moment – he recalled that there was no time to think or react
- He recalled that it still felt like the airplane was climbing right up to the point where the impact sequence started
- He stated that up until the impact he did not hear anything abnormal from the engines and did not hear anything from the front of the airplane
- He did not have a clear view of the pilot or the cockpit and could not see what the pilot was doing, they were not wearing headsets and did not hear anything the pilot may have said
- Mr. Berzas was a firefighter and had been trained on emergency egress. When he realized the airplane was going to hit the ground he braced for impact, grabbed his seat belt buckle, and tucked his head down
- During the initial impact sequence, he heard lots of noise and crunching; he never heard anything from the other people on board
- When the airplane hit the ground, there was an immediate fireball that came from the front right side of the airplane; he held his breath and kept his head down as the airplane slid and then came to a stop
- When the airplane stopped, he was dangling nearly upside down and his right arm hurt. He unbuckled his lap seatbelt with his left arm and then quickly walked away from the airplane
- A gentleman who was immediately on scene helped him get away from the wreckage