

National Transportation Safety Board

Office of Aviation Safety
Central Region



CEN21LA237

RECORD OF CONVERSATION

Mark Jason Gaerte

June 1, 2021

Interviewee: Mark Jason Gaerte
Date/Time: June 1, 2021 / 1522 CDT
Location: Telephone Call
Investigator: Andrew Todd Fox, NTSB Air Safety Investigator

Background:

Mr. Mark Gaerte was the pilot of the Grumman G-164B airplane, N8376K, that crashed on May 27, 2021, shortly after takeoff from runway 8 at Lakefield Airport (CQA), Celina, Ohio. Mr. Gaerte was also the aviation mechanic who regularly maintained the airplane.

NTSB Investigator Fox and Mr. Gaerte discussed the following:

Mr. Gaerte stated that he repositioned the airplane earlier in the day from Defiance Memorial Airport (DFI), Defiance, Ohio, to Lakefield Airport (CQA), Celina, Ohio. He explained that shortly after he departed DFI he noticed that he forgot to bring his GPS and returned to DFI. After retrieving the GPS, the pilot departed DFI and flew to Charloe Airport (53OH), Paulding, Ohio, where he retrieved a chemical "dry break" hose connector before he continued to CQA. Mr. Gaerte did not report observing any issues with the airplane during his preflight inspection or the repositioning flights.

Mr. Gaerte explained that the accident occurred during the 1st agricultural flight of the day. The retailer who sold the Caramba fungicide and Province II insecticide loaded the water/product solution on the airplane while Mr. Gaerte refueled the airplane with 27 gallons of Jet-A aviation fuel. Mr. Gaerte estimated the fuel load at departure was about 80 gallons, and the water solution with the fungicide and insecticide was likely about 330 gallons in total. Mr. Gaerte stated that the loaded airplane before departure was below the airplane's maximum gross weight, and that he previously flew the airplane with a similar load without any performance issues.

Mr. Gaerte backtaxied on runway 8 at CQA and completed an uneventful engine runup before starting the takeoff roll. During the takeoff roll the engine torque and propeller speed gauges indicated about 52 psi and 100%, respectively. Mr. Gaerte stated that he did not perform a maximum-performance takeoff, and a normal liftoff was achieved without any issues.

Mr. Gaerte explained that during the initial climb, about 20-75 ft agl, the airplane had a sudden fluctuation in engine power from high-power to low-power and back to high-power. Mr. Gaerte stated that he was "thrown forward" into his safety restraints and then "thrown back" into his seat. The forward/backward motion only occurred once and was "pretty quick and hard." Mr. Gaerte explained that after the loss of engine power the propeller speed remained at 100% but the airplane's climb

performance was significantly diminished. He did not cross-check any other engine gauges, including the 3-in-1 gauge that depicted oil pressure, fuel pressure, and oil temperature.

Mr. Gaerte explained that he pitched the airplane for best glide airspeed and entered a slight right turn from the runway heading to avoid trees. Believing the engine was still running, he did not want to jettison the load unnecessarily into the river near the airport. However, the engine lost all power shortly after he entered the right turn from the runway heading. Although he was wearing an active noise-canceling helmet, there was a noticeable lack of engine noise, and he only heard the wind passing outside the cabin. Mr. Gaerte then jettisoned the airplane's load to maintain a climb, but the airplane descended and impacted a levee where it nosed over into the river.

Mr. Gaerte stated that his engine start procedure included pulling the engine's fuel solenoid circuit breaker after the engine starts. He explained that this isolates the fuel solenoid from a possible electrical discharge that could inadvertently shut off fuel to the engine. This procedure is not included in the normal engine start procedure but is something that is widely practiced by those in the industry who fly agricultural airplanes equipped with a Honeywell TPE331 engine.

Mr. Gaerte explained that he does not use continuous ignition above 40% propeller rpm, the airplane engine does not have bleed air (circuit breaker was pulled & collared), and the fuel is gravity fed (no airframe boost pump installed). The condition lever was equipped with a mechanical stop at the high and low settings, and that the engine is typically run at 100% propeller rpm but can be run at 97% during cruise to conserve fuel.

Mr. Gaerte was very cooperative throughout the conversation.