

February 15, 2022

To: Jeremy Kraemer

From: Mark Helms

RE: N317KJ Flight Witness Statement

On Thursday, February 10, 2022, I, Mark Helms, was a passenger in Private Plane N317KJ which made an emergency landing in a cornfield east of Lincoln, Nebraska due to an engine malfunction. The pilot at the time was Richard Benjamin Phelps with whom I have flown with many times throughout the last two years since our company, Crash Consulting Services acquired this particular airplane; a 2019 Cirrus 22T.

Within the days leading up to this flight, Mr. Phelps conducted his pre-planning of the trip with the final destination of Grand Junction, Colorado slated for Friday, February 11, 2022 after a stop for the night of the 10th in Lincoln, Nebraska. Our departure location was from the Indianapolis Executive Airport located in Zionsville, Indiana.

I arrived at the Indy Executive Airport at approximately 5:20 PM Eastern Standard Time with our planned departure around 5:30 PM. Mr. Phelps was completing his pre-flight checks of the plane and fluids with the only addition that I observed of adding engine oil. When I inquired about de-icer fluid, he explained he had checked it prior to my arrival and that it had been added earlier in the week.

Once all equipment was loaded and secured within the rear compartment, we departed the hangar around 5:40 PM and taxied towards our runway. As I have observed many times, Mr. Phelps conducted his usual flight control checks and a “run-up” of the engine just prior to entering the runway. As I stated, I have observed Mr. Phelps perform these tasks many times within the past two years and felt confident in his skills as a private pilot. We received approval to depart from the airport communication center and did so with the destination of Lincoln, Nebraska.

After leaving the Indianapolis Executive Airport, we eventually reached our flight altitude of 10,000 feet with radio communication with the various airport centers throughout the flight. After nearly three-hours into the flight, we felt a slight “hiccup” of the engine at which time I observed Mr. Phelps complete a thorough examination of the diagnostic screens for any potential malfunctions. From my perspective, the engine speed and rpms did not appear to have changed very much nor did the plane have any abnormal deviations aside from what appeared to be a slight change in engine noise. Mr. Phelps continued checking the gauges and stated that it appeared we had lost cylinder three of the engine. I had observed Mr. Phelps conduct these checks in the past and felt confident in his determination of the issue at the time.

While continuing to observe the screens, Mr. Phelps began to search for alternative airports to land should the issue become a major problem. He contacted Omaha Center and advised them of our engine issue and the possibility of needing a change in destination should the need arise. After they provided and approved the alternate airport of Plattsmouth, we began our descent towards that location. Mr. Phelps then noticed the engine begin to smooth out and requested permission to continue to our original destination of Lincoln. Omaha Center approved this request and we continued on westward.

While continuing towards Lincoln Airport for approximately 10-15 minutes, we suddenly lost oil pressure and knew we had an emergency situation with the plane. Mr. Phelps immediately notified Omaha Center of this and advised we would be searching for “somewhere” to conduct an emergency landing. After turning nearly 180-degrees back eastward, we located what appeared to be a field east of Lincoln, Nebraska and began our emergency descent towards the ground. Mr. Phelps once again advised Omaha Center of our approximate location and activated the emergency on-board parachute landing seconds later. Once the plane came to a stop, we both immediately exited the plane in the event of a possible fire, verbally checked each other as to our status and Mr. Phelps notified 911 of our situation. Although heavily damaged, there was no fire nor apparent fuel leakage that could have created a potential issue for First Responders.

Once the First Responders arrived on-scene and began their preliminary investigation, both Mr. Phelps and myself were checked by Medical Personnel and completed Release Forms indicating we did not appear to need any further medical evaluations as a result of minor bumps and bruises. Eventually we gathered our equipment and belongings and were transported to the Lincoln, Nebraska airport to obtain our rental vehicle. The airplane was left at the emergency landing site with security being provided by the County Sheriff’s Department.

Mark Helms

