

Witness Statement – Heenan observing Hot Air Balloon Accident July 30, 2022

I, Michael Heenan, am an Aviation Safety Inspector (Supervisory role) assigned to the Honolulu FSDO WP-13 and I was off-duty and attending as a spectator, the National Balloon Classic in Indianola, Iowa.

I arrived at the field and positioned in the sparsely populated parking lot on the south side of the balloon field in order to observe the early morning dawn patrol, which typically departs prior to sunrise.

At approximately 5:15am, I observed six hot air balloons inflate on the balloon field and depart with a northwestern drift from the field. All six balloons departed in single file order, and I observed the required additional position lights hanging below each aircraft and the lights were operational from my viewpoint. Approximately 10 minutes or so after launching, I observed the first balloon that departed appearing to be operating at a lower altitude than the other five balloons that departed after the first balloon. Further observation indicated the first balloon was actually descending towards the ground, which was unusual as the aircraft was only about one mile northwest of the departure point.

As the aircraft appeared to be descending, I observe additional flames coming from the basket area below the burner. From the distance I was, it was difficult to gauge but it appeared to be brighter than normal. Further observation showed the flames continuing which is highly unusual as normal usage of the burner calls for intermittent burns and not continuous. The aircraft had a continuous burn and then ascending rapidly up, which caused me great concern with the continuous flaming. I started the car and sped to the pilot compound to notify the director of the event, Mr. Bill Clemons. I could not locate him but people were running around and it appears everyone was aware and a passerby informed me that Mr. Clemons was aware of the mishap.

I drove through the balloon field access road to the west side gravel road and turned north towards the accident site. Upon arrival, the recovery crew for the errand balloon were in the road and using a fire extinguisher to put out a fire on a cloth bag. The bag apparently was discarded from the basket of the balloon and landed on the gravel road. I stopped to provide assistance. Law Enforcement arrived and I identified myself as an off-duty FAA Inspector and I was awaiting arrival of Director Clemons and DSM FAA Inspector, Mr. Glass to assume authority for the accident.

Law Enforcement Officers (LEO) and myself combed the adjacent ditch area and located an additional cloth bag, a fluorescent light stick and a position light (still on) from the aircraft. Upon looking up, another position light with cord was located in the power lines. I would estimate the recovered ditch items and position light in the wires to be approximately two miles east of the town of Indianola and no more than one mile NW of the Indianola Balloon Field.

I provided a bag and assisted Inspector Glass in collection of the items. Mr. Clemons then arrived on the scene. Mr. Clemons and Inspector Glass then, individually, got in their cars and proceeded north as it was reported to Mr. Clemons on his hand-held radio that the aircraft had landed safely however the occupants had reported injuries and medical attention was in process.

This is my statement to the best of my recollection. I am a commercially rated balloon pilot in addition to my other aviation pilot ratings (Airplane). If you any additional information, please contact me at [REDACTED]

Note: I had a few pictures of the recovered items and forwarded the pictures to Inspector Glass in text format.