

AIRCRAFT ACCIDENT SUMMARY STATEMENT

AIRCRAFT: 1956 Cessna 172, N6762A, Serial #28862

LOCATION: San Marcos Regional Airport, San Marcos, Texas

DATE: Tuesday, February 20, 2024

TIME: Approx. 4:15pm CST

ACCIDENT: Plane in-motion at intersection of two taxiways, overturned by prop-blast from large twin-engine turboprop airplane testing engines at high power in adjacent run-up area.

AIRCRAFT DAMAGE: General air-frame integrity, both wings and one wing-strut, tail, propeller, engine (due to prop-strike), windscreen. Landing gear and cabin interior, including instrument panel, remain relatively intact.

OCCUPANT: Daniel W. Gibson, private-pilot and N6762A owner.

INJURIES: Superficial scrapes and bruises, no treatment except for two Band-aids for small cuts on thumbs.

PILOT'S NARRATIVE:

I had completed my pre-flight preparation and engine run-up for an afternoon local flight to practice maneuvers near Lockhart, east of San Marcos. I called Ground Control for clearance to taxi from the ramp adjacent to my plane's covered tie-down space. The airport was busy, and there was only one controller handling both airplanes on the ground and the ones in the air, so I had to wait a while to get his attention. It should be noted that the airport management had previously admonished the tower staff for often not having enough controllers on duty in the tower. My recent experience was that it was not unusual to have only one controller, and that upon landing the standard instruction was to stay on the tower frequency and taxi to parking.

I finally got through on the Ground Control frequency, received the taxi clearance, and repeated the instructions back. The controller did not respond with any corrections or advisories. I then taxied along the specified route, which included taxiways Alpha (parallel to runway 8-26), Charlie (parallel to Runway 13-31), and Juliette (former Runway 2-22) to Runway 17. At the intersection of Charlie and Juliette there is a relatively new airplane run-up area, where there was a SAAB 340-B, which is a large twin turboprop airliner-style plane, owned by Berry Aviation, with the engines being run at a higher than normal speed (75% power I later learned). Berry aviation's charter business is headquartered at the San Marcos airport, and the engines were being tested by two mechanics in the cockpit. The plane was facing south, away from the active taxiway intersection where the prop-blast was directed, and the mechanics later claimed that they had notified Ground Control of their location and what they were doing.

My taxi instructions took me past the SAAB. I had my noise-canceling headset on so I was not aware of how loud it was, and Ground Control did not warn me or the mechanics in the SAAB of a possible conflict. I think the controller was possibly preoccupied with other traffic and wasn't paying attention to my location, and had forgotten about the SAAB. In the past, there have been times that Ground Control was extremely vigilant about notifying taxiing aircraft of possible hazards along their route, such as vehicles or personnel associated with the taxiway Alpha reconstruction project. Planes, including mine, have taxied by the subject run-up area without incident in the past when planes were running up their engines.

The run-up area is large, so there was a pretty good distance from the SAAB to the north side of taxiway Charlie. I taxied by as far away as I could from the Berry Aviation plane, and set my control surfaces as I would for a rear quartering crosswind from the left. I was nearing the Juliette intersection where I would turn right. However, before I reached that point, the SAAB prop-blast still lifted the left wing and rear of my plane and flipped it over, with me along for the ride. My plane was suddenly upside-down in the middle of Juliette. The front of my plane was now facing the rear of the SAAB, which was still going full-blast and blowing prop-wash through the now broken windscreen of my plane. The doors were jammed shut due to buckling of the wing metal next to the doors, but I was able to crawl out through a large hole in the windscreen. I turned off the master and all electrical switches, and removed the key from the mag switch. The wings were now on the pavement, and fuel was leaking out of the tanks, easily draining away from the plane. The engine had stopped, of course, due to the prop-strike that occurred as the plane nosed over.

The Berry Aviation mechanics in the SAAB cockpit were completely oblivious as to what had happened, since they were parked facing the opposite direction. I had to fight my way out of their prop-blast and ran over to the front of their plane far enough that they could see me over the nose. I waived and crossed my arms to signal engine shutdown, and pointed in the direction of my upside-down plane behind them. After getting out and seeing what had happened, they called their maintenance supervisor (Ramon Echeandia), and two airport management staff (Jim Wimberley and Cassidy Berranato) eventually showed up in their truck, as well. Berry Aviation brought out material to absorb the remaining fuel on the pavement, and we eventually were able to clean up the debris field that consisted of items that the prop-blast blew across Juliette and into the grass on the opposite side.

Using a strap around the upside-down tail and a couple of dollies put under the wings, a tug was used to drag the plane into the grass so that the taxiways could be reopened for use. The following morning (Wednesday), workers at Specialized Aero, an aircraft maintenance and paint-shop businesses at the airport, were able to flip the airplane back onto its still-intact landing gear, and tow it to their facility for indoor storage until it could be inspected by the insurance adjuster.

The outside of the plane is banged up pretty bad, but the landing gear and cabin interior, including the instrument panel, survived relatively undamaged. The propeller has curled ends, and the engine is probably severely damaged now, of course. Fortunately, the seat belts and shoulder straps (four-point harness) did their job. I'm physically fine, but I did obtain a medical evaluation as requested. The plane, which is substantially under-insured, appears to be a total loss.

In my opinion, the SAAB should not have been running at high power when parked in such a manner that its prop-blast blew across an intersection of two active taxiways, effectively taking those taxiways out of service for small planes. Also, perhaps the City or Berry Aviation should provide a separate protected area with a blast fence or wall for testing engines on aircraft of the size of the SAAB 340-B.

Finally, I feel like the control tower staff dropped the ball in giving a taxi clearance without warning either me nor the SAAB mechanics of the known hazard or conflict. There should be a rule that there be at least two controllers in the tower at all times that it is open so that they would be more capable of providing proper guidance to planes both in the air and on the ground.

There is now one less 1956 Cessna 172 in near mint condition left in the world.