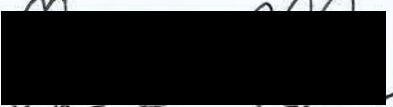


Witness, accident at 7NC5, 13 April 2014

Three of us were conversing at the north end of runway 04/22; Bill King Frank Swett and myself. We heard John Whatley call on the radio entering the pattern for a right downwind to runway 22. Bill and I looked toward the downwind for 22, found the Solo approximately abeam the landing area of 22 and we both commented that he looked low. Although he looked low I thought it was makable and I wasn't overly concerned at that time, just paying attention. His base turn took him behind the trees that are north of the field. Bill and I both watched for the Solo to appear from behind the trees and I expected a low, close-in turn from base to final. It soon became apparent that too much time had passed and we started walking toward the fields located to the north and east of the airport, expecting an off-field landing. Shortly after that we heard the impact, ran toward the sound and found the Solo with John being attended to by homeowners that lived near the airport.


THOMAS C HOLMES

William King



Greenville, NC • Phone: • Fax: E-Mail:

Date: April 14, 2014

Mr. Cecil J. Land
Aviation Safety Inspector (Operations)
GREENSBORO FSDO EA-39

Subject: Glider Accident at 7NC5 on April 13, 2014

Dear Mr. Land:

I am writing to you in regard to an email sent to me by Mr. Frank Swett regarding the glider accident involving Mr. John Whatley.

I am the pilot that flew N318BA prior to Mr. Whatley's flight and will provide a brief summary of its operation on Sunday during my flight. Additionally, I witnessed part of Mr. Whatley's pattern and the moment of impact, abet through the trees from my line of sight.

Flight prior to Mr. Whatley's flight.

N318A was pre-flighted inspected by me at about 12:30pm on Sunday. There were no unusual items identified with the aircraft other than being a bit dirty with pollen. Static flight control movements were normal. Mr. Swett and myself performed a positive control check prior to moving the glider to the flight line. No abnormalities were observed. In flight I did not observe any abnormal flight characteristics. Slow flight in thermals was normal as previous flights in the aircraft. I flew the aircraft for about 1 ½ hours making short cross country out and return legs down to Zebulon and back a couple of times. Winds aloft at about 4000' were from the south at about 15-20 knots. Thermal were gusty and strong below 3500' with a couple above 10 knots. Winds were brisk upon landing at about 3:00pm. I recall checking the windsock at the airfield and it was fully extended on my downwind leg. I flew a left hand pattern landing to the south on runway 22. On approach the wind was quite gusty and I had to use the spoilers a lot to maintain a good glide slope. Other than some humming by loose gap seal tape at the wing root I did not notice anything unusual for the aircraft.

Observations of Mr. Whatley's flight.

After my flight Mr. Whatley wanted to take a flight so we towed the glider back to the end of the runway and proceeded to launch the glider. Observations of Mr. Whatley's takeoff were normal and no adverse conditions were observed. If I recall the takeoff was around 3:30 or so. Maybe a bit sooner.

I recall hearing a radio call and Mr. Frank Swett asking Mr. Whatley if he wanted another tow. I looked for him in the pattern and notice that he was on a down wind right hand pattern approach for runway 22. From the position on the left side of the runway looking north, right of the road, I noticed that Mr. Whatley's altitude was low for what would be a standard pattern making a comment to Mr. Swett and Mr. Holmes, " he looks awfully low". Assuming he encountered heavy sink we move the right side of the service road waiting for his final approach. Anticipating the time from his altitude and not seeing him cross the end of the runway, I was looking through the trees in the direction of impact area to see if the glider was landing out in the wheat field. I caught the impact through the trees and saw the tail of the aircraft in what appeared to be a near vertical angle (>50 degree) then seeing what appeared to be the wings rotate as in a ground loop but at a higher angle. We then heard the impact noise and went to check.



There should be pictures from the neighbor prior to the fuselage being moved by fire and rescue. She said that she would send to Mr. Swett. Upon approaching the aircraft from the back I observed that the aircraft was laying tail pointing toward the woods, aligned with the small ditch where it came to rest. The fuselage was lying on the left side facing forward with the wings lying on back of the fuselage. The wings were still connected at the spar but were torn from the fuselage. Mr. Whatley was conscious but bleeding from his face, with his right foot pinned by the rudder pedals and fuselage/instrument panel. The canopy was completely shattered. Only one impact area was observed. I have attached a picture of the impact spot.

Weather observations in the impact area:

Wind in the impact area appeared to be light given the wind at takeoff and looking at the top of the trees in the area. I would estimate at less than 5 knots at ground level in the impact area. Estimate based on virtually no movement in the wheat blades in that area. Thermal activity was still prevalent in the general area as observed by significant fair weather cumulus still present.

The hand held GPS was removed from the aircraft and should still have my flight along with Mr. Whatley's flight. I did not remove it prior to the flight and it was still on when he was flying. We removed it as we did not want it to get stolen. You can see Mr. Swett to obtain the unit if needed. The unit was still on when I took it on the golf cart to the clubhouse, so sorry for the erroneous data. There should be a long pause at the impact area and you should be able to trace back. I ask that the data not be erased as I would like to reconstruct the flight for training purposes.

These observations are to my best recollections of the accident on Sunday April 13, 2014. If you have any questions please do not hesitate to contact me.

Sincerely,

William (Bill) King
Certified Flight Instructor - Glider [REDACTED] GFI

Observations

Glider Accident, Vicinity of 7NC5 (Crooked Creek Airport)

13 April 2014

I was the pilot of the towplane (C-172 N19855) that towed up the glider involved in the accident, a LET L33 N318BA). The pilot of the sailplane was the scheduled towpilot for the day, but as soaring conditions were good, he asked if I would tow him up for a flight on the L33 when it returned from its previous flight. One of our glider instructors, Bill King, had taken it up for proficiency flight and flew for around an hour and a half in good soaring conditions. There were plenty of thermals, and several gliders were up in the vicinity. Cloud bases were around 5,500', and gliders were easily reaching 4,500' – 5,000'. Returning glider pilots reported good soaring conditions, but quite gusty and turbulent. A previous pilot of our Grob two place sailplane reported that it took tight turns in gusty conditions to remain in a thermal. Since he was taking his wife up for her first glider ride, he elected to return after an hour and a half, as she had had about enough for a novice passenger. The glider pilot, John Whatley, and I discussed the tow, and agreed that I would plan to tow to 3,000' unless John found a strong thermal at a lower altitude, in which case he would get off early. Winds were a bit gusty 6 – 8 knots, out of the southwest, almost down the runway (22) – with maybe occasionally higher gusts, so we departed on runway 22, climbed to around 700' AGL, and I initiated a turn back toward the runway while climbing. We crossed the runway around 1,400' or so and I continued north, planning to make a turn back south to release the glider on the south (upwind) side of the runway. As we got a little under a mile north of the runway, just as I was beginning my turn back to the south, we felt a strong thermal. The rate of climb indicator on the towplane went from 500 – 600 fpm rate of climb to 1,200 fpm. John released at that point, at approximately 2,000' msl. The actual release point was perhaps a bit over a mile slightly northwest of the runway, near the town of Bunn, NC. There is a solar farm just south of the town that often generates thermals, and that's a spot many of our pilots use for release. I continued back to the airfield, made a low pass to drop the towrope on runway 22 at the threshold end, and continued around for a landing on runway 22, taxied to the towplane parking spot, shut down, and joined our club treasurer, Tom Holmes, and the CFG who had previously flown the L33, at the north end of the runway to wait for John to return. Shortly after I got there, he called on the radio that he was returning for landing at Crooked Creek. I asked him on the handheld if he was going to want another tow since the flight was so short, and he responded "affirmative". At the time, I was facing south talking to Tom and Bill, who were both facing north. Bill commented "he's awfully low", soon echoed by Tom, and they were saying "is he going to make it back"? I turned to look for the sailplane, but never saw it. By that time, the trees northwest of the runway were blocking our view, and very soon after, we heard the impact – which was obviously pretty severe. We all ran toward the wheatfield where we heard the impact, and as we approached, some neighbors were already there. I yelled and asked if anyone had called 911, and they said yes, they had. When we got to the aircraft, the fuselage was rotated around 45 degrees to the left

– toward the ground, the wings had separated from the fuselage, but were lying approximately in the correct position on top of it, and the aircraft was faced away from the runway. John was still in the cockpit, with his head dangling down toward the ground to the left side. The canopy was shattered, and he was bleeding profusely from cuts in several places on his head. I could see bubbles of blood coming from his nose, and was concerned that he might have punctured a lung. I got down beside him and held his head up, so he wouldn't strangle on the blood. A neighbor lady was nearby, and I asked her if she would cradle his head so I could see about getting him out of the cockpit. By that time, we could hear the sirens from the fire dept. and rescue vehicles. I could see John's foot wedged between the right rudder pedal and the instrument cluster in the center panel. It was twisted at an unnatural angle and firmly wedged in place, so we couldn't remove him from the cockpit. I asked another neighbor if he had a crowbar we could use to try to prize the rudder pedal and firewall back away from the console to remove John's foot. There wasn't enough structural strength left in the side of the cockpit to be able to prize the rudder pedal back, and by that time the fire and rescue people had arrived. They brought up a hydraulic shear, and we cut enough of the cockpit and firewall away to release John's foot. Initially he had been only semi conscious, but he began to regain consciousness as we worked to extract him from the cockpit. An EMT was holding his head and talking to him by this time, the other EMT's had arrived with a carrying board and stretcher, so we slid the wing to the right to make room under the left side of the fuselage to get him out. We got him out of the fuselage, his right ankle obviously pretty badly broken, and he complained of severe pain in his left leg. The rescue folks had already called for a lifeflight helicopter, which came to the fire station approximately a mile away. The EMTs got John into the ambulance, and headed off to the helicopter, which airlifted him to Wake Medical Center, where he was admitted and remains.

As Chief Towpilot for the soaring club, I've checked out all six of our towpilots at Crooked Creek, as well as regularly flying with them for proficiency checks, and John is one of the most careful and conscientious pilots we have. He is an experienced Naval Aviator, senior Captain for American Airlines, flying a Boeing 777 to Beijing on a weekly basis. His judgment has always been impeccable. He's conscientious, attentive to detail, and a pleasure to fly with. He is on the Board of Directors for our soaring foundation, which provides scholarships to students interested in learning to fly gliders – who can't afford it. One of those young students, a senior at N. C. State in Aeronautical Engineering, who just completed his commercial glider pilot rating last summer – thanks to the Foundation, volunteered to sit up with John all night Sunday night, so his wife could get some sleep. As towpilot for the weekend, he flew 13 tows on Saturday, and 2 tows previous to his glider flight on Sunday. I would feel comfortable flying with him anywhere, anytime. No one but John knows what happened between release and the accident, but John's skill and judgment are among the best we have.

14 April 2014



Frank M. Swett

CFI



Zebulon, NC

