

Kenneth M. Spivey – Commercial Pilot; Certificate # [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]
Destin, FL [REDACTED]

Cell: [REDACTED]

Airplane Single and Multiengine Land; Instrument Airplane

Statement regarding the events/conditions at Destin, FL (KDTs) on the evening of 2 August 2016. Times are local, CDT.

I am currently employed as a corporate pilot, based at KDTs, flying a Piper Cheyenne I twin-engine turboprop. My initial aviation training was via Undergraduate Pilot Training in the US Air Force in 1979-80. I served 4 years as an Air Force instructor pilot and 1 year as a C-12 (King Air 200) pilot. After serving 6 years in the Air Force, I returned to civilian life, but not primarily as a pilot. Since 1985, at various times I have worked approximately 4 years full-time in aviation, with my current pilot employment beginning in November 2014. During this current period of flying vocationally, I have accumulated just over 180 hours in the Piper Cheyenne. Almost 25 of those hours have been at night, with 43 night landings, most of which have been at Destin.

On the evening of 8/2/2016, I decided to have the aircraft pulled out of the hangar and onto the ramp in order to fly a local night flight. This was in order to get in a couple of night takeoffs and landings, as my night currency was to expire in the next 7 – 10 days.

I had completed the exterior checklist while the plane was in the hangar, and had it pulled out at approximately 2015. I did have a right seat occupant; a college student who had been our house guest for the summer. He was nearing the end of his stay with us, and wanted to see Destin from the air, even if it was at night. That was also part of the reason that I chose this night to fly; it was about the only evening open on his schedule. He had no aviation experience.

Normally, the FBO aircraft handlers would have parked the plane with the passenger door toward the FBO. However, since they knew this was simply a local currency flight for me, not involving the loading of passengers or luggage, it was more convenient to just pull it up facing the opposite direction, which left the nose of the airplane on a heading of about 120, allowing me to see the runway while I was running the various checklists. This was not the norm.

We got in the airplane by about 2020, and I began running the pre-start checklist. At some point during the time of strapping in and running the checklist, I remember an aircraft taking off from Rwy 14, Destin. About the only reason I noticed the takeoff was that my plane was facing opposite the usual direction at the FBO. Because I had not started engines, I was able to hear the aircraft also. As the aircraft, which I later learned was the accident aircraft, passed by my sight line, everything looked and sounded normal. At this point, the aircraft was 50' to 100' above the ground, with clean configuration as best I could tell. There was nothing unusual or abnormal about the takeoff. The only other activity in the pattern / Destin traffic area that night was at least one of the tour helicopter operations still flying.

Within the next couple of minutes, I had started engines, called my taxi intentions, and started taxiing to Rwy 14. I had the common frequency, 123.07, on radio one, and was monitoring Eglin departure, 132.1, on radio 2. The first indication that there was anything unusual was communication from Eglin -- to the helicopter pilot, I believe -- asking if he had noticed the accident aircraft departing Destin. I believe I remember the helicopter pilot, or whoever was talking to Eglin, saying that the aircraft had departed. I also recall it being mentioned that there was no radio contact with the aircraft. At this point, though, I had no idea that there was any suspicion of a possible accident.

About this time, I was approaching takeoff position, and called my takeoff intentions on 123.07, stating that I would be staying in the local area, west and then east along the coast at about 1000'. Because of Eglin Air Force Base, even VFR flights are required to have an assigned squawk, and are restricted to 1000' or below, south of the coast line, until in contact with Eglin departure. I had set my transponder code, and had my radio ready to flip to departure after takeoff.

I took off on Rwy 14 between 2032 & 2035, using normal procedures, climbing to 1000'. Passing 400' - 500' I stated on the advisory freq. that I was changing to departure. After changing to departure frequency, I was already fairly close to the coast, and rapidly approaching 1000'. I reduced prop RPM and also torque, and then had to noticeably push forward on the yoke to prevent climbing through 1000'. I called departure during this sequence, and began a turn to the west along the coast, at 1000'.

It was during this time that the total lack of visual cues out the front windscreen really got my attention. I even commented to my passenger that flying over open water at night can be very dangerous for that very reason, and that a pilot really has to cross check instruments, even though the weather is completely clear. Though there was no ceiling reported that night, and no restrictions to visibility, the total lack of visual cues really struck me. There was no moon, and due to some cirrus clouds, no stars were visible either.

As I began my turn to the west (right) at 1000', the lack of visual cues was even more significant, due to losing all visual references of the coast line over my left shoulder. Also, because of the bank angle in the right turn, there were no visual references out the right side during the first part of my turn. It was only after about 45 degrees of heading change, that I began to pick up the ground lights out the front windscreen.

It was also during this turn, right after I had contacted Eglin departure, that the controller asked me to squawk ident. I found that even in the minor process of reaching over to the right to press ident, I banked further to the right. When I cross-checked back to my instruments, I was in 40 - 45 degrees of right bank.

After completing my turn and proceeding west, Eglin departure asked if I saw any smoke right below my position. Being completely dark at the time, there was no way I could have seen any

sign of an accident unless there had been a fire associated with it. I continued west for about 3 miles; then made a right 180 to head back east just inland from the coast, and climbing to 1500'. Departure had no further questions for me, and the only indication we had that anything had happened was the presence of a lot of emergency vehicles beginning to appear on the main road through Destin, and beginning to congregate at a point just west of the extended centerline of Rwy 14. After flying east for about 10 miles, I turned back to the west, toward the airport, and was cleared to change to advisory frequency for Destin. As my passenger and I were flying back, the abundance of emergency vehicles made it clear something unusual had happened. It was only then – after questions from Eglin departure re: the aircraft taking off; the comment that there was no radio contact with the plane; and then being asked if I saw smoke – that all these things began to fit together and caused me to realize that there very probably had been an aircraft accident.

From my experiences that night, I would not find it at all difficult to believe that if a pilot had to set in a frequency or transponder code while turning, or had any other distractions, it would be entirely possible to get into an unrecoverable attitude / altitude situation.

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