

Inspector Statement – NTSB ERA16LA191 (N925PS)

Gabriel Henkel

Aviation Safety Inspector

Nashville Flight Standards District Office



May 26, 2016

On May 23, 2016, Inspectors Henkel and Standifur traveled to Lawrence County Airport (2M2) in Lawrenceburg, Tennessee to investigate an aircraft accident involving N925PS. This accident occurred on May 22, 2016 at approximately 1330 local time. The accident site was located in a field approximately 300 yards northwest of the threshold to runway 35 on private property adjacent to the airport. The aircraft occupants sustained back injuries and lacerations, and were taken to a local hospital for treatment. No fire resulted from the accident.

The inspectors first met with David Pharr from the Lawrence County Fire Department. He was a first responder. He provided the names of the aircraft occupants: Dr. Leon Everett (left seat) and Charles Phillip Sikes, Jr. (right seat). He then escorted the inspectors to the accident site.

The inspectors investigated the aircraft wreckage and took photographs. The following items were noted:

1. The tachometer indicated that the engine had only been run for 4.1 hours.
2. The aircraft registration certificate, airworthiness certificate, and operating limitations were not found onboard the aircraft.
3. The seatbelt for the right pilot station had broken loose from its outboard attach point.
4. The rudder cables had been rigged incorrectly so that the rudder was deflected opposite of what was intended when the rudder pedals were pressed.
5. Continuity was found between all flight control cable and pushrod attach points.

Mr. James Riggs introduced himself as a witness to the accident and a friend to both aircraft occupants. He explained that Mr. Sikes' aircraft records were stored in Dr. Everett's hangar. He contacted both individuals to obtain their permission for the inspectors to enter the hangar and review the aircraft records; neither objected.

The inspectors found a signed document, dated July 8, 2015, that appeared to be serving as a bill of sale between Chris Braun, the former aircraft owner, and Mr. Sikes. The aircraft registration certificate, airworthiness certificate, and operating limitations were all found in a folder in Dr. Everett's hangar. The aircraft logbook only bore two entries, both dated March 16, 2016: a condition inspection signed by Mr. Sikes and an airworthiness certification signed by Gary Meuer, a Designated Airworthiness Representative (DAR).

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Later that day, the inspectors traveled to Dr. Everett's home to conduct an interview. Dr. Everett explained that he agreed to ride along for the aircraft's maiden flight at Mr. Sikes request. Mr. Sikes was an inexperienced pilot and wanted someone familiar with his type of airplane to accompany him and monitor the flight. Dr. Everett had previously built the same type of airplane and had accumulated a number of flight hours in it. Dr. Everett stated that he did not assist Mr. Sikes with his aircraft build nor did he provide him with any flight instruction.

Dr. Everett stated that just prior to their flight, Mr. Sikes had complained of a "sticky" rudder. In an attempt to remedy that situation, Mr. Sikes lubricated the rudder cables; it was unclear whether or not he disconnected the rudder cables to accomplish this.

Dr. Everett described the flight as only lasting five or six seconds. The intent was to fly a few feet above the ground down the length of the runway and then possibly around the airport traffic pattern. He stated that the left wing dipped dramatically and the aircraft began to drift to the left as soon as the aircraft came off the runway. Mr. Sikes applied full right rudder and right aileron in an attempt to correct the aircraft's flight path and attitude. As he applied full right rudder, the aircraft behaved as if he had just applied full left rudder. The aircraft continued to climb, but not high enough to miss the trees located in the field adjacent to the runway. The aircraft struck the trees and fell to the ground approximately 100 yards to their south.

After the aircraft came to rest, Dr. Everett stated that one of his feet had become pinned in the wreckage and that Mr. Sikes was now on top of him because his seatbelt had broken. Mr. Sikes was able to crawl out over the left wing. Dr. Everett eventually freed his foot and was able to slide out of the cockpit under the left wing. Both men were bleeding from cuts they had sustained, and both were experiencing back pain.

Dr. Everett then mentioned Elroy "Buzz" Devoll. He stated that Buzz performed work on Mr. Sikes' aircraft and also provided Mr. Sikes with flight training.

Prior to returning to Nashville, the inspectors decided to interview Buzz over at his hangar. He stated that he first began interacting with Mr. Sikes approximately two years ago when Mr. Sikes delivered N925PS to 2M2 via a box truck. The inspectors encouraged Buzz to provide the month and year that the delivery took place; he looked through some records and indicated January of 2015. Upon delivery, he noted that the rudder, fuselage, and wings were already assembled.

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The aircraft was initially stored in Buzz's hangar so that Buzz and his other mechanic, Chad Kemp, could work on Mr. Sikes' aircraft. Buzz stated that he and Mr. Kemp had worked on Mr. Sikes' aircraft cumulatively for between 10 and 20 hours. He mentioned that they installed the seatbelts and helped "straighten" out the wings that appeared to have been delivered with some "twist" in them.

Buzz stated that Mr. Sikes would come down from his home in Kentucky to stay at 2M2 for a few days or a week at a time so he could work on his own aircraft. According to Buzz, Mr. Sikes would consult with other pilots around the airport about how he should build his aircraft and would often choose to undo work that Buzz and Mr. Kemp had already accomplished so he could do it his own way. Over time, Mr. Sikes grew increasingly frustrated with the work that Buzz and Mr. Kemp performed and decided to move his aircraft over to Dr. Everett's hangar, no longer allowing Buzz or Mr. Kemp to perform any work on his aircraft.

The inspectors queried Buzz about flight training he may have provided to Mr. Sikes. He stated that he had trained Mr. Sikes in his "750" to prepare him for a sport pilot practical test. When asked how much total flight time he believed Mr. Sikes had accumulated at the time of his practical test, Buzz indicated approximately 40 with 5 being solo. Buzz further stated that he accompanied Mr. Sikes to his practical test in the state of Arkansas and that Mr. Sikes did pass the test.

Buzz mentioned that he believed Mr. Sikes was unqualified to make the test flight in N925PS on May 22, 2016. He stated that Mr. Sikes had actually asked him to conduct the test flight approximately two months prior to the accident. Buzz agreed to do it as long as Mr. Sikes named him on his insurance policy. Buzz never got the opportunity to conduct any test flights in Mr. Sikes' aircraft.

On May 24, 2016, Inspectors Henkel and Standifur interviewed Mr. Sikes via telephone since he was already at home in Kentucky after being discharged from the hospital the day prior. At the very start of the conversation, Mr. Sikes mentioned that he was experiencing a lot of back pain due to injuries he sustained from the crash and was taking a lot of strong pain medication like morphine and Percocet.

Mr. Sikes then described the accident: he stated that he had asked Dr. Everett to ride along with him in his aircraft the morning of the accident. Their plan was to lift a few feet off the runway to see how the aircraft handled. Unfortunately, after they lifted off, the aircraft immediately started turning to the left. Mr. Sikes applied right rudder and right aileron, but could not get the aircraft's attitude corrected. He applied full throttle. He saw

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that they were going to hit the top of some trees. The next thing he knew was that his back was against the roof of the airplane, he was on top of “Doc”, and that he was looking at his feet. Mr. Sikes stated that he was able to crawl out of the airplane on top of the left wing.

Inspector Henkel asked Mr. Sikes to provide some history prior to the accident: Mr. Sikes first mentioned that his wife had come down from Kentucky to watch him fly the day prior to the accident. He said it was a little windy that day and some of the “professional guys” at the airport told him to wait if he was not comfortable with the winds. He elected not to fly that day.

The next morning, Mr. Sikes’ wife had to return to Kentucky to meet some prior obligations back home. Mr. Sikes was actually glad that she would not be around because he “didn’t want his wife to see if something were to go wrong.” In terms of a timeline, Mr. Sikes stated that it was approximately 11:00 a.m. when his wife left the airport; it was approximately noon when he was “getting the nerve to go fly”; it was approximately 1:00 p.m. when he and “Doc” finally did go fly.

Mr. Sikes then described how he acquired the aircraft: he stated that he really wanted to buy this plane while he was deployed in Afghanistan a few years ago. He found N925PS, owned by Chris Braun, almost complete in San Diego, California. He purchased the aircraft from Mr. Braun on January 1, 2014, and drove it to Lawrenceburg, Tennessee in a Penske truck. Somehow he lost the original bill of sale between himself and Mr. Braun. He claimed that Zenith Aircraft Corporation sent him the original bill of sale between themselves and Mr. Braun. The DAR that certificated Mr. Sikes’ aircraft told him the bill of sale from Zenith would suffice for certificating purposes.

Next Mr. Sikes provided details on the building of his aircraft: He first stated that 51 percent of the aircraft was already completed by Mr. Braun when he acquired it – the fuselage, landing gear, outer skins, wings, tail, dashboard, and most of the engine. Sikes claimed that he added a radio, transponder, carpet, rivets, skins, fuel tanks, paint, and doors; he also redid the engine baffling. Mr. Sikes said he paid Buzz to install the wings, cables, fuel tanks, tail section, engine baffling, cabin heat, engine exhaust, seat pans, seats, and seatbelts.

Mr. Sikes claimed to have fixed several “screw-ups” by Buzz. One example had to do with Buzz using the wrong bolts to attach the propeller and the struts. The inspectors asked Mr. Sikes how he knew Buzz had used the wrong bolts. He said he had consulted

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with several other pilots from the airport and with Zenith. He was unclear as to whether or not he consulted with the aircraft blueprints.

Inspector Standifur asked Mr. Sikes if he held an airframe, powerplant, or repairman certificate; Mr. Sikes said he did not hold any of those certificates. However, he said the DAR told him he could apply for a repairman certificate when he was finished building the aircraft. He also mentioned that he had not performed any maintenance on the aircraft, only its construction.

The inspectors then asked Mr. Sikes several questions to obtain the following information:

- The accident occurred on the maiden flight for N925PS.
- Mr. Sikes admitted to being the pilot in command for the accident flight.
- Mr. Sikes claimed to have received an official weather briefing prior to the accident flight.
- Mr. Sikes stated that he did not file a flight plan prior to the accident flight.
- His intent for the flight that resulted in an accident was to fly over the airport for about 45 minutes.
- Mr. Sikes did flight training with Buzz and performed his sport pilot practical test in Memphis.
- Mr. Sikes stated that he may have rented Buzz aircraft a couple of times after his practical test.
- Mr. Sikes stated that he had accumulated between 26 and 28 total flight hours.
- Mr. Sikes said he was aware of his aircraft limitations document but did not remember reading it. He said he remembered the DAR telling him he needed to fly for about 40 hours.
- Mr. Sikes stated that his intent was to "do things right".

Last, Inspector Standifur asked Mr. Sikes specifically about the rigging of the rudder pedals. He stated that Buzz and Mr. Kemp rigged his rudders. He remembered Buzz and Mr. Kemp having a disagreement about whether or not the cables were supposed to cross.

Signed,

A solid black rectangular box used to redact the signature of Gabriel L. Henkel.

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