

Witness Statement of Bill James, [REDACTED] (Peach State Airpark), Williamson GA 30292,
[REDACTED]

I am a retired dual-rated Master Army Aviator with over 33 years of aviation service as a pilot, IP, SP, and Aviation Safety Officer/accident investigator. For the past 14 years I have been employed as an Aviation Safety Inspector for the US Department of the Interior.

On Thursday afternoon, 17 Nov 2016, I was at my car on the driveway/taxiway in front of my hangar when I heard the Candler Field Jenny, N1662, throttle up for takeoff from the southeast end of the runway. I turned around to watch it takeoff as I have always done whenever I heard it flying. The Jenny used little runway to get airborne and was in a nice, normal climb as it passed my location about $\frac{3}{4}$ of the way down the runway. The engine sounded as it always did and she looked absolutely beautiful!

Then, when the aircraft was just past the runway end markers at about 110-120' AGL, I heard what sounded like a loud backfire followed immediately by two not-as-loud "pops." It seemed the aircraft perceptibly hesitated for an instant. Then silence. It started a slow, left, descending turn over the trees. At about the 90° point in its turn, I saw a momentary flicker of flame appear on the forward left side of the fuselage that audibly "whoomped" into a raging fire (as gasoline fumes do when suddenly ignited) that streamed back over the top and left side of the fuselage halfway back on its length. There was no visible smoke emanating from this fire. The fire persisted in intensity as the airplane continued forward and down and then it passed from my view behind the trees. The impact sound was very distinct and immediately followed by a loud explosion with a large black mushroom cloud. It was all over in less than 20 seconds. I immediately called 911 to report the crash. A column of black smoke continued for some time.

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