

Inspector's Statement

(Initial report of N9421P accident)

June 10, 2020

On May 30th, 2020, at approximately 1500 hrs, I arrived on scene at the site of a reported fatal helicopter crash. The aircraft was located in a residential roadway directly across the street from [REDACTED] Ozark, AL. No reported post-crash fire occurred. The area had been secured by the Ozark Police Department. The sole occupant and Pilot in Command (PIC) was identified as Brian J. Little (Certificate # [REDACTED]). The pilot was extricated by first responder personnel just prior to my arrival, and transported by the Dale County Coroner.

As I began initial scene survey, the aircraft is identified as N9421P (owned by Eagle Aviation Academy, LLC). It appeared the aircraft experienced a high angle descent through a large tree that was approximately 60-70 feet tall. Tree limbs up to approximately 8 inches in diameter were snapped and lying within the wreckage and mostly covering it. A significant amount of oil was leaking from the engine. The engine appeared to be shattered in the lower portion with numerous components snapped off. The instrument panel was bent forward. Rotors appeared to have an upward bend with chord-wise wrinkling. Leading edges were predominantly undisturbed. Control rods of the rotor hub were connected. Tail boom was broken away and laying in close proximity. The tail rotor was still connected and displayed minimal damage. The fuel tank was significantly compromised however there did not appear to be any appreciable amount of fuel present as noticed

by myself or first responders that were on-scene within minutes of the reported incident. The fuel cap was off but still attached by the retention chain. The tank exhibited both crushing, tearing, and intrusion by branches. No odors of fuel were detected or reported. A small amount of absorbent material was placed around the tank location by fire department personnel. Based on statements regarding the refueling of the aircraft and compared to an estimate flight time, it is reasonable to believe there should have been a significant amount of fuel present. The aircraft was reported to have departed a private helipad located at [REDACTED] Midland City, AL 36350, at approximately 11:10 A.M. CST with the incident occurring at approximately 11:30 A.M. CST. The student pilot was scheduled for a 1.1 hour flight with solo practice events at Ozark Municipal Airport (Blackwell 71J).

As I continued to examine the site, I discovered that the LOW FUEL warning light (located on the instrument panel) was placarded as INOPERATIVE. The carburetor was also located. The throttle cable was still attached. The carburetor sustained extensive damage. Primary drive belts appeared to be undamaged and remained attached. Numerous photographs were taken of the scene. During the course of my inspection, Mr. Frank Mayer (owner) returned to the scene and informed me his daughter would deliver the aircraft and student pilot documents. In addition to delivering the requested items, Mr. Mayer produced an unsigned statement from Mr. Little's Certified Flight Instructor.

The first witness I interviewed was Alabama State Trooper Chris Ward. Trooper Ward was off duty at the time. He told me

he observed the helicopter above the tree line across the street from his house at [REDACTED], Ozark, AL. He explained from his point of view (standing in front of his residence) he saw the helicopter facing directly at him. The engine appeared to be losing power. Trooper Ward went on to explain that it seemed like he was trying to re-start momentarily but it “spun around” and headed in the direction of the crash site. He said he saw it “nosedive” but never saw it impact any trees. He heard the crash and immediately contacted the Ozark Police Department. He would later clarify he observed the aircraft at an estimated height of two hundred feet above the tree line.

The next witness I spoke with was Laurie Ann Carr. Mrs. Carr lives direct across the street from the crash site, [REDACTED] [REDACTED] Ozark, AL. She told me that she was cleaning up yard debris around her home from the previous evening’s storms. As she was walking up her driveway, she heard a low flying helicopter. As she looked up, the helicopter appeared to pull up but immediately fell straight down and through the tree. She immediately called for her husband who was in the backyard of the residence cutting grass. Her husband, James Carr immediately went over to help but realized one person was already deceased.

I then spoke with Mr. Jim Trawick, who was cutting a relatives grass at the time of the incident. He was located at [REDACTED] [REDACTED]. He told me he could hear the helicopter sputtering loudly. He explained that the sputtering seemed like the engine was “cutting in and out”. He said the helicopter appeared to try to turn but it went silent and dropped.

At approximately 1800 hours the Coroner returned to the site to receive the toxicology kit.

At approximately 2000 hours, Atlanta Air Salvage arrived and began recovery efforts. As they cleared debris from the site and prepared the aircraft for loading, a GoPro camera was recovered once the aircraft was lifted. Once the debris was cleared, it was evident that the extensive damage was too great to safely search for other information or items such as cyclic and airframe Hobbs times and pilots logbook. The wreckage was transported to Atlanta Air Salvage for security and further investigation.

On Monday, June 1st, 2020, I interviewed the Student Pilot's Flight Instructor identified as Pyman Gholami (Certificate # [REDACTED]). Mr. Gholami had previously provided an unsigned statement of the day's events. This statement was given to me at the time I received the aircraft maintenance logs and historical items as well as student records. During my initial contact with him, he stated that he and Mr. Little had conducted an earlier flight in the same aircraft. They had flown 1.4 hours of dual instruction. He told me the aircraft had been running well, no maintenance issues. Everything in the "green". He explained they had landed with approximately 15 gallons of fuel (Tank capacity is reported at 30 gallons). He said after landing, he retrieved the fuel truck to refuel the helicopter. Mr. Little observed the fuel gauge while he refueled it.

I spoke with Mr. Frank Mayer who owns Eagle Aviation Academy. I asked him about the placarded Fuel Low warning light. He told me that several weeks before, they were doing an inspection and discovered the light inoperative. The mechanic

placarded the system. Also, Mr. Mayer explained that everyone knew the system was inoperative and as a policy, the aircraft are always rented with a full tank of fuel. The LOW FUEL warning light had been discovered during an inspection previously. According to him, the MMEL allows the system to be inoperative. After reviewing the logbooks, I did not see any such related discrepancy entered. I spoke with the mechanic who placarded the aircraft. He is identified as Jay Conley (Certificate # [REDACTED] – IA). I asked him why he had not placed a discrepancy in the logbook. He responded by note pad (he's unable to speak due to a health condition). He said he thought it was more important to get it placarded first. He also stated that the aircraft had been running good, recently had a 25 hour inspection, and he had looked at the aircraft, the day of the mishap.

I then travelled back to the accident site to re-inspect the area for any sign of "fuel blighting" since a few days had gone by. Aside from some typical old dried up brown leaves at various areas, no relatively new blight areas were observed on or around the tree.

On June 3, 2020, I returned to Mr. Mayer's hangar to continue the interview with Mr. Gholami to clarify some points. I asked Mr. Gholami to explain the moments prior to the mishap flight. I asked him if he was sure if he refueled the helicopter. He said he couldn't exactly remember who refueled the helicopter. He explained he retrieved the fuel truck but couldn't remember for sure if it was he or Mr. Little who actually refueled the helicopter. I asked him what else was happening during that time. He explained that he and Mr. Little were just talking about

things. I asked specifically what they were discussing. He said they were discussing the flight, and that it was such a nice day he (Mr. Little) should enjoy it before coming right back (but to stay in the local area). He said he went inside while Mr. Little finished doing a preflight inspection of the helicopter. I inspected the fuel truck. No fuel logs are maintained. The fuel is purchased in bulk and delivered filtered and filtered as it is transferred to the servicing truck and filtered again as it is distributed to aircraft. Mr. Mayer explained that's why he doesn't maintain a fuel log, in addition to each aircraft is always serviced full. At the conclusion of the site visit with Mr. Mayer, I returned to the accident site and inspected again for any evidence of fuel blighting of the surrounding vegetation. None was identified.

To date, any appreciable amount of fuel that would be reasonably expected despite the nature of the damage cannot be identified or substantiated based on lack of physical evidence and eyewitness reports from First Responders on scene within minutes after the accident.

**Peter D
Rose**

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