



NTSB RECORD OF CONVERSATION

Lynn Spencer
Air Safety Investigator
Eastern Region, Office of Aviation Safety (AS-ERA)
National Transportation Safety Board

Date: 8/5/2020, 5:32 pm EDT
Person Interviewed: Mr. James Clayton, pilot
NTSB Accident Number: ERA20LA273

The following is a summary of a conversation that occurred with the above-named individual:

- Mr. Clayton provided a background of his close relationship with his brother and evolution of their family business prior to reviewing the accident flight.
- He explained that the purpose of the flight with his brother, grandson and one other individual was to enjoy the scenery and look at some properties.
- He stated that his brother, a pilot but not rotorcraft rated, took the controls for about 20 minutes during the flight.
- They stopped for fuel at Mc Ghee Tyson Airport (TYS) about 1.5 hours before the accident and took on 100 gallons of fuel.
- Returning to his home, he made a wide right circle over the river to approach the landing site near the river's edge on his property.
- On approaching the river from the South/South-West, he continued descending and turned right following the river the short distance to the landing site. Upon nearing the landing site another right turn was made before coming to a hover.
- On the prelanding check, he noted the fuel level was approximately 25 minutes.
- He stated, "I was descending with low power and a 25° angle of descent; ever slowing to come to a hover at low speed over the water about 75 ft from the landing site. Normally anytime you come in at low power when you get slower and slower and you enter the hover and still have a way to go, it's going to settle when you come level."
- He stated that he "put in normal hover power to stop the descent" and he was going to "hover on over about 75 feet over the water to the landing site."
- "When I pulled in the power, it started to settle and I pulled max power to stop the settling and it was as if it didn't have any power and it did not respond as it typically did and then we were in the water."



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- I asked if there was any yaw or turn before they entered the water and he responded, "I can't say that there was no yaw because you are subconsciously correcting for that; any yaw that occurred was corrected for. I do not recall any unusual yaw. You use your feet in correcting yaw all the time unless you are at steady cruise. It is calibrated for minimal or no yaw at normal loading and cruise. It settled right into the river."
- He stated that he had not noted anything unusual prior to this; it was smooth and quiet and performed normally.
- I asked whether there was any exchange of controls before the upset, and he responded, "No. There was not any exchange of controls during this time; Joe took the controls after getting fuel and levelling off at altitude (1500 ft) and he flew west about 30 miles, and then I took the controls we went over north Knoxville; he had not touched the controls since they were in west Knoxville. He only flies the helicopter at altitude and straight and level."
- He added, "It settled rapidly, and I could not arrest the settle."

The digest was e-mailed to Mr. Clayton for review on August 8, 2020, at 1132 EDT. He replied on August 8, 2020, at 1454 EDT with edits that were incorporated into the narrative. Mr. Clayton also included in his response the following passenger weights: Jim C --- 170, Joe C --- 170, Flynt Griffin --- 185, Jay McBride – 230. The corrected digest was e-mailed to him on August 8, 2020.



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Date: 8/6/2020, 5:29 pm EDT
Person Interviewed: Mr. Flynt Griffin, Passenger
NTSB Accident Number: ERA20LA273

The following is a summary of a conversation that occurred with the above-named individual:

- Mr. Griffin had been flying with his grandfather (Mr. Clayton) since he was a child. In the last several months since moving to the area, he had flown with his grandfather 2-3 times in the helicopter.
- He stated that his grandfather always made sure that every passenger knew everything they needed to know: “On every flight, he wants everyone to put and understand their seatbelts and how they work and work the doors. The doors are tricky and he wants you to know how to work the doors.”
- On the day of the accident, Mr. Clayton had Mr. McBride operate the door several times and had even commented to him that he was very good with the door. He stated that it was Mr. McBride who opened the door after the accident.
- He stated that it was an uneventful flight and a beautiful day, and he could not tell anything was wrong (he was in the back left seat) until the last seconds. He had only a little visibility above the seats.
- They came over the hill and came down the river and they made a typical approach to that landing area and they slowed as they approached and descended. “Everything felt very normal.”
- Typically, his grandfather “comes in and slows to a near stand-still and comes to a hover and slides over to the parking area . . . but when he went to slide, we just kept sinking/losing altitude.”
- They had slowed to the point that he felt they were ready to slide over to where they land, but they went from seeming very normal to being in the water. “No warning, no one said anything, no master caution or warning.”
- They approached the water in a level position “but when that skid hit and then the rotor hit, we were torqued into the water on the left side.”



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- His sense was that the skid on the left side might have dipped into the water first. He thinks the skid may have barely hit and then that tilted the nose down and the rotor hit. When the rotor hit, it slammed the helicopter in on its left side.
- He felt like the helicopter instantly hit the water. He did not have time to grab his seatbelt and the cabin immediately filled with water. He had no time to think of anything other than, “We’re going to hit and I’m gonna have to get to my seatbelt but then you were already in the water.”
- “The right side was the highest point and that’s why he (Mr. McBride) was able to open the door before it went under. He said it opened pretty easily.”
- He stated that all about 2 feet of the cabin was submerged immediately and was filling up quickly. He thought, “Seatbelt and breath!” He took a deep breath from the air bubble above him and swam between two right front seats. He grabbed onto Mr. McBride and helped keep his head above water and tried to grab for his seatbelt, but Mr. McBride got it loose.
- He shimmied over the side of helicopter (6 inches under water) to get to his grandfather. He tried to look for him but could not see under the water, and about 5 seconds later his grandfather popped up away from helicopter (he had to swim away from it).