

Witness Report for Accident on 23 SEP 2020

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CFI [REDACTED]

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On 23 SEP 2020 I arrived at KINF at about 06:45 Eastern time to pull planes out of the hangar and begin preflighting for my scheduled flights. I was scheduled to fly with a new discovery flight student, and simultaneously my student Michael (David) Risner was scheduled to have his first solo flight. There was also a third Right Rudder Aviation plane scheduled to fly as well - piloted by another student soloing named Robbie Carden. We all arrived at the airport at about the same time. When we arrived, Randy Berry had already removed his Pawnee from the hangar. As myself and the Right Rudder Aviation students preflighted our respective planes, Randy taxid the pawnee to the Southeast corner of the apron near the primary hangar and proceeded to fill it with chemicals.

Michael Risner was operating the Piper PA-11 N71017, Robbie Carden the Cessna 150 Aerobat N515RV, and myself the Pipistrel Alpha Trainer N34RR.

After myself, Michael Risner, and Robbie Carden finished preflighting our planes, we all began taxiing at approximately the same time - led by Michael. Randy taxid towards the approach end of runway 19. We made the decision to wait for him to depart and then use runway 1, due to a very light change in the wind that Michael noticed.

Two or three minutes after Randy departed on 19, Michael departed from Runway 1 - to fly a closed pattern for his first solo flight. After I performed my engine runup, Michael Landed and cleared the runway, and then I took off. I climbed in the pattern to reach about 1500-2500 feet while laterally located on the long right downwind for runway 1. I observed Randy operating in the farm fields south of the airport as I was on crosswind and the early portion of downwind. As I was climbing, Michael had taxid back and took off for his second traffic pattern. I observed that he was on the right downwind while I heard him on the radio say "I can't see Randy any more...<unreadable> right base..." I thought that he was trying to say that he wasn't comfortable turning base yet because he couldn't see Randy's plane, so I told him over the radio to just fly a normal traffic pattern and continue doing a good visual scan. He then responded on the radio and said "I don't see Randy, and there is fire there." At that time, I noticed smoke and flames in the treeline between the fields south of the airport.

I told Michael and Robbie both at that time to perform full stop landings and to stay on the ground while I went to investigate. I didn't want them to continue in the traffic

pattern at the time because I didn't want the stress of the situation to interfere with their solo flying.

I wasn't sure if the smoke was caused by Randy's plane at that time, so I descended from my location to about 500 feet and circled over the location of the flames to see what caused it. It is common around the airport for neighbors to burn brush and trash, so I didn't declare an emergency immediately. I tried to contact Randy on the CTAF frequency for Inverness - 122.725. He did not answer, and as I was circling I noticed large amounts of white material on the ground - more white than there would be if it was just ash. I declared an emergency on CTAF and then on guard - and throughout the rest of the event I alternated between the two frequencies to give traffic updates for myself and communicate the emergency to ATC.

Due to my low altitude, transmissions were garbled. I gathered that my emergency call was being relayed through to an ARTCC - I think Jacksonville. I said "MAYDAY MAYDAY MAYDAY Pipistrel 34RR Aircraft down two miles south of Inverness and on fire, aircraft type Piper Pawnee. Color - White. One soul on board. MAYDAY MAYDAY MAYDAY" and indicated that I would continue circling over the airport to mark its location. I called the Inverness base station radio located in the FBO using the CTAF/Unicom and instructing Robbie and Michael - who were now on the ground and out of their planes - to call 911 and call Beverly - Randy's wife.

I saw a truck and an offroad vehicle pull up to the fire, moving back and forth between the fence. Later, they were followed by an ambulance. After I saw the ambulance pull up, I climbed to about 1500-2000 feet where it seemed the reception was better for those listening to my radio calls on guard. I said "Pipistrel 34RR EMS is on site in Inverness, Pipistrel 34RR will be landing at Inverness now" and I provided my personal cell phone number so that those involved on guard could call me when I landed, if they needed information.

After returning to land on runway 1 at Inverness, I shut down my plane, and assisted my students with securing their aircrafts in the hangar safely. I went in to the office and called Jacksonville Approach on my cell phone - identifying myself as the pilot of N34RR and asking if they needed any more information. I provided them with Randy's name and my phone number.