

Pilot Statement: Robert M Thomas Jr

On August 11th, I received a call from my maintenance shop. They informed me that my aircraft was ready. We had just replaced all the spark plugs due to an uneven mag drop I experienced the last time I tried to take it up for a maintenance test flight. Thankfully, I never take passengers even after minor maintenance. That personal minimum paid off in a big way on this day. The following morning had a beautiful forecast, so I proceeded to the airport for a test flight. Since the aircraft had not flown in several weeks, I performed a very thorough inspection and found everything to be in order. I moved on to the pre-start checklist and then to engine start. The engine start was unremarkable, and the engine idled very smoothly. I recall thinking how great the decision to change all the plugs at the same time was. The engine had never run smoother. After being cleared to taxi, I proceeded to the run-up area. I performed a thorough run-up. Everything was within tolerances and the magneto check went very smooth. The KISM tower had to switch runways due to a wind shift noted by a pilot who had just landed. I was cleared to back taxi full length. The engine was very smooth during the high-speed taxi. I did a 180 and was cleared to takeoff Runway 33.

During the climb out I tried to gain as much altitude as possible to give me options should the engine fail. The climb rate was great, and the engine was smooth at full climb power. I made a crosswind and a downwind turn while continuing to climb, but I had to stay under the KMCO Bravo 1600ft shelf. Not observing any difficulties in the pattern, my plan was to head to one of the south practice areas, do a few maneuvers and return to land. I was cleared for a southbound departure and proceeded on course. I kept COM1 on the tower frequency since I was not going far from the airport and was not under flight following. I proceeded slightly west so I could climb up to 3500ft under the 4000ft Bravo shelf. I made a left turn to head east for a bit. As soon as I cleared the Bravo, I focused on climbing to 7500ft to give myself more glide cushion. I advanced checked the mixture, then set props full forward. I cannot remember if the RPM drop happened after I started moving the throttle to full forward or if it happened before. The engine immediately went to about 1200 RPM. It took a few seconds to recognize what was happening and my first thought was to get to best glide speed to buy some time. Even though the engine was technically running, I ran my engine out checklist. As part of that, I tried a different fuel tank and tried the fuel pump. I tried moving the throttle from full forward to idle and back a few times, hoping something would catch, but there was no response. There was no difference, as the engine was smoothly running just at 1200 RPM. At this point, I check my Foreflight and notice the glide ring has no airports in range. There was a private field, but it was about $\frac{3}{4}$ of a mile beyond my ring. I immediately began looking for a soft place to put the airplane down. Unfortunately, I was directly over a state preservation area and there was nothing but tall pine trees. I continued a slow right turn searching and saw some shorter trees in the distance. At this point the avionics began the expected terrain warnings. I was hyper focused on the airspeed and finding a spot to land. I was determined not to stall the airplane and nosedive into the ground. I also remember thinking, fly the plane, don't become a passenger. I made a radio call to the tower letting them know I was going to have to put the airplane down in the trees. After that transmission, I did not have time to 121.5. I cleared some of the taller trees, slid open the passenger door latches, and began focusing on the final landing spot when the avionics started to warn me about airspeed. I was right above minimum controllable speed. At this point I remember the wing hitting a few taller trees, but thankfully they were thin, and my flight path was undisturbed. After that, I flared and let the tail settle into the trees. The airplane slowed pretty quickly and one of the prop blades hit the ground. The airplane ended up resting on the trees, that apparently absorbed enough energy to save my life. I was eyes wide open until impact. I somehow only had minor injuries, including a lip cut with 9 stitches and a small forehead laceration that was fixed with glue. I was able to exit the aircraft and was able to take a screenshot of the GPS location in case I needed to come back and use the

aircraft for shelter. I found a path and after about 20 minutes of walking found a signal. I called my wife to get assistance and then immediately called the tower to let them know I was the only occupant and did not need search and rescue. I called the NTSB hotline but was told to focus on my medical issues first.

I had received my high-performance training and endorsement in a PA32 in December of 2020. I purchased N898CP in May 2023. I had a pre-buy and then an annual inspection completed before picking up the aircraft at KCLW. When we took delivery, I spent the whole weekend with 2 different instructors who had lots of time in the PA32. The training we did on slow flight, prepared me to know how the plane would feel just above that critical stall speed. We did several 180 power-off landings, so when the plane began to sink rapidly compared to the Cessnas I trained in, it did not take me by surprise since I had done it several times. I cannot thank my CFIs enough for all those times they pulled the power during training and said okay, what do you do now. It can be a mundane exercise as time goes by, but I'm glad they focused on it, and I was ready in my time of need.



Robert M. Thomas, Jr.