

Investigator Name: Gene Rambo
Title: Aviation Safety Inspector
Division: Aviation Safety - Eastern Region

Date: October 03, 2025 - 1300L
Subject: ERA25LA371, Interview with Pilot
Contact: David Robinson [REDACTED]

I spoke with Mr. David Robinson, the pilot of N888WV by phone. He stated that he had approximately 495 hours in this aircraft. I did not ask his total tailwheel time but he also owns a Pitts Model 12 aerobatic biplane that he has owned since 2003. He is a former Air National Guard KC135 and A7 pilot, and retired from FedEx as a pilot at age 65.

On the day of the accident, Mr. Robinson flew into 7TN4, a privately owned grass airport, for the first time. While there, he gave two rides to other individuals, so he had three landings at that field before the accident. He was leaving to return to his home airport alone.

On this takeoff, at about 5:30p local time he taxied to the end of the runway and did a 180 degree turn. The takeoff was to the west and the sky was clear, therefore he was looking directly into the sun. Upon adding takeoff power, he looked into the cockpit for the manifold pressure gauge to verify takeoff power, but it took a few seconds for his eyes to adjust to the shaded cockpit. When he looked up, he was surprised that the sight picture was not what he expected, as he had drifted to the left and none of the runway edge markers were in sight. At this point, he believes that the left main wheel went into a shallow "ditch" or "dip" along the side of the runway. He applied full back stick and right rudder but the aircraft was not responding, he believes, because of the "ditch." He believed that it was too late to abort the takeoff at this point. After passing the hangar building and a crowd of onlookers the left wing hit a 12' metal pole and then a tree which swerved him into a large group of trees. The airplane rolled over and came to rest almost inverted. The impact dazed him, and he remembers seeing the propeller blades bent back and that his canopy, which he locks half open for takeoff, had slammed almost fully shut.

Three bystanders arrived and tried to open the canopy. The aircraft caught fire, and the bystanders finally kicked out the left side panel of his canopy and pulled him through it. They dragged him away, and at about that time the fire trucks arrived.

Mr. Robinson believes that he spent too much time on the cockpit overcoming what he described as similar to snow-blindness from looking into the sun, and that he let the aircraft drift too far to the left at the start of the takeoff roll.

Upon further questions, Mr. Robinson stated that his aircraft does have a steerable tailwheel with the rudder when locked and full-swiveling when unlocked. He acknowledged the importance of the tailwheel being locked before takeoff to maintain directional control. Mr. Robinson stated that he unlocked the tailwheel by pushing forward on the control stick in order to make the 180 degree turn at the end of the runway, but he does not recall checking to verify that the tailwheel was locked afterward. However, he does not recall the rudder pedals feeling different or "loose" as he would expect if the tailwheel had been unlocked. He does concede that it may have been unlocked and that if so, it could account for the sequence of events. He indicated that the tailwheel appears to be locked after the accident, because moving the rudder also moves the tailwheel indicating that it is locked at this time. He conceded that if the tailwheel had been unlocked, moving the rudder by hand could cause it to lock. He agreed to look closely at the tailwheel locking mechanism, along with the FAA inspector, when the aircraft is being recovered, and to review the video of the accident to see if he can determine whether the tailwheel appears to be unlocked. He indicated that he would call me back with the results.

The call lasted 25 minutes.