

Narrative for NTSB investigation of accident involving glider N21TH and Dan Colton

Winds were light on the ground, under 5 knots as I departed on runway 30 from Bishop at approximately 1pm on Thursday, June 22nd. The tow was a rough, repeatedly lifting the tow plane in front of me. This type of rough air on tow was not new for me and is typical of flying in this area and indicative of strong lift.

I released at 7,100' in what I through would be a good thermal to climb up to the ridge top of the White Mountain range. I immediately found myself struggling to find lift and was uncomfortably close to the terrain on the small spines leading up the main ridge top. I continued my search for lift and nearly returned to the airport for another launch but found a thermal climb back up to my original release altitude and decided to give climbing the ridge again. I managed a climb to around 8,000' MSL but was again still circling too slow close to the terrain.

The winds aloft were stronger than on the ground and at 17 knots and still from the North West. I was finding climbs on the downwind side of the spines that had lifted off the canyons below or were above and just downwind of the ridges.

Immediately prior to the crash I executed two turns in a thermal at a speed that was too slow for the proximity of the terrain and then dove at 70 knots through 10 knots of sink in the lee of a spine. In hind sight I should have headed straight down the canyon instead of continuing toward the ridge. The altitude loss in just a few seconds was nearly 500 feet. I then pulled up and slowed to 50 knots when I felt the sink subside, which was way too slow as I was now approaching the spine. I no longer had sufficient energy to clear the ridge of the spine at a safe airspeed. As I cleared the ridge, I encountered steeply dropping terrain and the wind noise around me stopped and everything went silent. This was likely a tail wind filling in the vacuum created by a strong thermal rising off the ridge right in front of me. As the controls went soft I could see that I was stalled and plummeting toward the terrain and trees below. I pointed the nose down at a steep angle right at the terrain to try and get enough air speed so that I could arrest my descent right before impact to make the imminent crash more survivable.

As I arrived at tree top my right wing impacted a tree and the glider spun violently to the right and ended with me racing through the dirt between the trees until the glider came to a violent stop with the two wings stopped by two tree trunks and the fuselage right between the two trees.