

Factual Report – Attachment 1

Interview Summaries

AIR TRAFFIC CONTROL

WPR16FA172

Interviewee: Greg Nicoll

Date / Time: September 21, 2016 / 1100 CDT

Location: Telephonic

Present: Daniel Creedon, FAA; Eric Stormfels, National Air Traffic Controllers Association

Investigator: Andy Olvis

During the interview, Greg Nicol stated the following:

Mr. Greg Nicoll began working for the FAA in July 2010 when he reported to the FAA training academy, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. He completed the academy in October 2010 and reported to Monterey Air Traffic Control Tower (ATCT), Monterey, California (MRY). In October 2010, Mr. Nicoll transferred to Sacramento ATCT, Sacramento, California (SMF) where he stayed until October 2015 when he transferred to the Phoenix/Deer Valley ATCT (DVT), Phoenix, Arizona. In May of 2015, he transferred to the Reno/Tahoe International Airport ATCT Reno, Nevada (RNO) where he has remained. Mr. Nicoll was qualified on all operating positions within the tower and was designated a controller in charge (CIC); he had no prior ATC experience; his medical was current with no restrictions. His supervisor was Mr. Craig Lucas and his regular days off were Saturday and Sunday.

On the date of the accident, Mr. Nicoll was working his regularly scheduled shift of 1230 to 2030. He remembered the shift as normal with nothing out of the ordinary, and he was working a normal rotation of on position followed by being on a break. After returning from his second break period, Mr. Nicoll was assigned to the local control position.

About 10 to 15 minutes after assuming the local control position, the pilot of N958CA contacted the RNO local control frequency reporting 8 miles east of the airport on a wide downwind. Mr. Nicoll had been coordinating a runway crossing with the RNO ground controller and did not respond to the initial pilot report from N958CA. He observed the text "25" in the data block scratchpad on the tower display workstation (TDW) for N958CA indicating runway 25 at RNO. The TDW was a radar slave from the Northern California Terminal Radar Approach Control (NCT) and provided a radar picture to the air traffic controllers working in the tower cab. The "25" in the data block indicated the NCT approach controller had vectored the aircraft to be sequenced for runway 25 at RNO. Mr. Nicoll said that while he was coordinating with the ground controller, NCT called and said N985CA would be "the last aircraft to land runway 16L" and that the aircraft would be coming to RNO in the downwind. Mr. Nicoll responded to the pilot of N958CA and instructed the pilot to continue for Runway 25. He used this technique when the arrival sequence for RNO was not clear and this would allow him to assess traffic spacing as the aircraft got closer to the airport. Mr. Nicoll heard a transmission on the local control frequency asking about "restrictions." He was not sure who had made the transmission and thought it may have been a pilot talking about the scheduled presidential movement scheduled later that week; Mr. Nicoll did not respond to the transmission.

When the pilot of N958CA had first contacted RNO ATCT while still in the downwind, Mr. Nicoll had been working UPS9706, a Boeing 757 (B757) on a 9-mile final for runway 16R,

and FDX1359, also a B757 on about a 14-mile base leg for runway 16R.

A short time after instructing the pilot to “continue” for runway 25, the pilot of N958CA reported on a wide downwind for runway 16L; Mr. Nicoll instructed the pilot to continue for runway 16L. After the pilot reported a left base for runway 16L, Mr. Nicoll issued the surface wind and told the pilot there was a B757 (FDX1359) on a 9-mile final for runway 16R, issued a wake turbulence cautionary advisory, and cleared the aircraft to land. The pilot acknowledged the traffic but did not report the B757 traffic in sight. About 1 minute later the pilot reported the “airliner” in sight and Mr. Nicoll observed the track of N958CA turn onto a “dog leg” almost direct to the runway 16L threshold. He told the pilot of FDX1359 that the pilot of N958CA had them in sight. Mr. Nicoll would call traffic based on a clock position unless the traffic was on final, when he would use mileage from the runway.

When N958CA was about 2 miles northeast of the airport, the pilot “squared” off the base leg and turned west to fly a more traditional pattern before turning final approach. Mr. Nicoll had used binoculars and observed N958CA with the landing gear down. After FDX1359 had landed on runway 16R, Mr. Nicoll instructed a Bombardier DH8 to line up and wait on runway 16R. As the pilot of the DH8 acknowledged the clearance, the pilot asked Mr. Nicoll if he had observed the smoke and flames off the airport. Mr. Nicoll used the binoculars and attempted to visually acquire N958CA. After attempting to reach the pilot of N958CA several times, he called for an “alert 3.” Mr. Nicoll did not observe the aircraft crash.

The NCT controller had set the sequence for runway 16R as UPS9706 followed by FDX1359. Originally, N958CA was sequenced to land runway 25, and Mr. Nicoll felt there may have been enough space between UPS9706 and FDX1359, but after the pilot of N958CA reported a second time on a wide downwind for runway 16L, Mr. Nicoll changed the landing runway to runway 16L. He changed the sequence to have N958CA land on runway 16L behind FDX1359 and changed the scratchpad to reflect the new runway assignment. Mr. Nicoll felt FDX1359 would arrive at runway 16R before N958CA arrived on runway 16L. He had utilized the TDW to assist him in setting the sequence. Mr. Nicoll could not say for sure if the pilot absolutely knew he was supposed to land behind the FDX1359 B757. Mr. Nicoll could not explain who was responsible for ensuring separation in the sequence if the RNO local controller changed the sequence or landing runway.

NCT would establish the sequence for the sequence for aircraft to the straight in and base leg, and with VFR aircraft, RNO local controllers could sequence by entering downwind. Mr. Nicoll said he could sequence a downwind VFR aircraft for the parallel runway, as long it did not affect the NCT sequence on the other runway. The airspace at RNO was classified as class C airspace. Mr. Nicoll had worked at MYR and SMF, which were both class C airports. He could not recall any specific training as it related to class C services or requirements.

When Mr. Nicoll transmitted the location of FDX1359 to the pilot of N958CA, the B757 was reported to be 9 miles from runway 16R. Mr. Nicoll was confident the pilot of N958CA had FDX1359 in sight and not UPS9706, which was about $\frac{3}{4}$ of a mile from runway 16R. He said FDX1359 could not have travelled 9 miles in the minute between calling the traffic and the pilot reporting the traffic in sight. Mr. Nicoll felt that if there had been any confusion about UPS9706

and FDX1359 he would have called both aircraft to the pilot of N958CA. He felt it would have been clearer to the pilot. There had been no control instructions issued by Mr. Nicoll to the pilot of N958CA to ensure the aircraft would be third behind FDX1359. He said that with similar sequences, he would normally point the traffic out to each pilot and let them fly their airplane providing their own separation. Mr. Nicoll reconsidered and thought the pilot of N958CA was aware of the sequence and did not think FDX1359 would pass N958CA on final.

Mr. Nicoll was aware of wake turbulence separation requirements and said that RNO utilized wake turbulence recategorization (RECAT). RNO local controllers could use pilot applied visual separation in lieu of the wake turbulence mileage separation requirement. Pilots would routinely land small aircraft directly behind a B757 by staying above the B757 traffic and landing long. When Mr. Nicoll called traffic on FDX1359 to N987CA, the pilot of N958CA did not report the B757 in sight. After reporting the "airliner for the right" in sight, Mr. Nicoll did not instruct the pilot of N958CA to maintain visual separation. Instead, he told the pilot of FDX1359 about N958CA. Mr. Nicoll recognized that he did not complete the application of visual separation. He would treat runways 16R and 16L as a single operation as required by FAA JO 7110.65. However, under RECAT procedures, he said it would have been acceptable to have a BE36 side by side with a B757 if pilot applied visual separation were utilized. Mr. Nicoll had received training on RECAT, but realized he had not instructed the pilot of N958CA to maintain visual separation with the B757.

Mr. Nicoll accurately described the effect of wake turbulence from a heavy aircraft or B757 on a small aircraft. He said the wake would trail behind an aircraft and dissipate about 900' below a heavy jet and 500' below the B757. Mr. Nicoll was aware that the wind was 250 degrees at 17 knots with gusts to 20 knots. He said the wind would likely blow the wake towards the runway 16L final approach course. Mr. Nicoll was not concerned with the wake because runway 16L arrivals normally remained above the flight path of the B757s landing on runway 16R provided they had the other aircraft in sight. According to Mr. Nicoll's understanding of RECAT rules, the facility was permitted to sequence aircraft this way, and was a normal practice. General aviation aircraft operating in the RNO pattern avoiding heavy or B757 aircraft, would normally touch down by taxiway "F" and get off the runway by taxiway "J." They would touch down on runway 16L about 2,000 to 3,000 feet down the runway before exiting the runway.

When RECAT procedures went into effect at RNO, Mr. Nicoll had received a briefing and a slide show on the application of RECAT. He had not attended the FAA radar training class at the training facility, but had taken computer-based instruction (CBI) on the subject. Mr. Nicoll had received training on wake turbulence and standards involving the parallel runways at RNO.

The interview concluded at 1230 CDT.