



MEMORANDUM FOR RECORD

Stephen Stein
Air Safety Investigator
National Transportation Safety Board
Office of Aviation Safety – Western Pacific Region

NTSB Accident Number: WPR17LA197
Aircraft Registration & Make/Model: N75753; Boeing A75N1 (PT17)
Accident Location: Santa Paula, California
Accident Date: September 4, 2017

Note: The following interviews were documented by the Investigator –In-Charge (IIC), Stephen Stein.

Interview #1 Summary

Brad Ball

Radial Engine Airframe and Powerplant Mechanic, Continental W670's

Interview date and time: November 19, 2018; 2002 PT

According to Mr. Ball, the absence or loss of one spark plug may not be noticeable unless a magneto check is performed. After speaking with other Stearman owners, he further remarked that a loss of one spark plug may result in a loss of approximately 100 rpm.

Interview #2 Summary

Brad Ball

Radial Engine Airframe and Powerplant Mechanic, Continental W670's

Interview date and time: January 29, 2019; 1352 PT

According to conversations the specialist had with witnesses, he noted that the engine sounded anemic, as opposed to having a misfiring cylinder. He further remarked that a hole in the primer

line would result in an induction leak for cylinders 1, 2, 6, and 7. The mechanic spoke to a witness of the accident who stated that the engine sounded anemic just before the airplane departed on the accident flight.

Mr. Ball reported that marginal slippage of the cam timing could also have prevented the pilot from starting the airplane and caused a running engine to be sluggish.



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Interview #1 Summary

Caleb Curry

Radial Engine Airframe and Powerplant Mechanic, Continental W670's

Interview date and time: January 29, 2019; 0753 PT

Mr. Curry reported that the Continental W670 is an inherently anemic engine. A cylinder misfire would have been noticeable. A hole in the primer line would result in an induction leak for cylinders 1, 2, 6, and 7, resulting in an overly lean fuel/air mixture. He further added that on a hot day with the airplane near gross weight, the airplane would experience difficulty maintain altitude if it lost a cylinder. A cylinder misfire would have been noticeable on the ground.



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Interview #1 Summary

Chris Olmsted
Witness

Interview date and time: September 4, 2017; 1638PT

Mr. Olmsted stated that he was on the west side of the airport when he heard a Stearman airplane that caught his attention. He had visual contact of the airplane during its departure from runway 22 and observed a sound that resembled an engine that was missing a cylinder. The engine sound did not sound like it was making full power. The airplane did not appear to climb higher than 300 ft above ground level. At this altitude the airplane did not appear to climb anymore. The airplane subsequent turned crosswind and then began a descent into the Santa Clara riverbed.



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Interview #1 Summary

Gareth Williams
Accident Pilot

Interview date and time: September 4, 2017; 1553 PT

According to Mr. Williams, the accident flight was his 4th total flight of the day and third consecutive flight that afternoon as the first flight was at 0900 and the accident occurred about 1358 PT. He reported that everything was normal prior to departure including the takeoff roll. During climbout the engine started to sound rough and the airplane was not achieving its normal climb performance. The airplane reached about 500 ft at which point it was no longer climbing. The pilot stated that he selected a landing site in a dry riverbed and conducted a stabilized approach just above stall speed. While the airplane touched down flat, its forward motion was almost immediately arrested by surrounding brush and it flipped over inverted.

Interview #2 Summary

Gareth Williams
Accident Pilot

Interview date and time: September 19, 2017; 1356 PT

Mr. Williams stated that he topped off the airplane on the morning of the accident flight (the fuel tank holds approximately 46 gallons of 100 low lead aviation grade gasoline). flew the airplane for about 0.6 hrs during the flight at 0900, 0.6 hours during the flight at 1400, 0.4 hours during the subsequent flight, and 0.1 hours during the accident flight for a total of 1.7 hours on the day of the accident. He uses the airplane's fuel tank sight gage to verify fuel quantity as the airplane is not equipped with an internal fuel gage. He estimated that the engine normally consumes about 14 gallons of fuel per hour. He further remarked that he added 6 shots of primer before each flight on the day of the accident.

Interview #3 Summary

Gareth Williams
Accident Pilot

Electronic mail correspondence date and time: October 31, 2018; 1624 PT

According to Mr. Williams, he normally takes off with the engine at full power and then retards the throttle to 70% power at cruise flights. His scenic flights with passengers normally took place around 2,000 ft. On a hot day, the airplane's climb rate would be approximately 500 ft/min, and would take 3-4 minutes to reach the airplane's cruise altitude.

Interview #4 Summary

Gareth Williams
Accident Pilot

Electronic mail correspondence date and time: November 1, 2018; 0908 PT

The excerpts below were statements by Mr. Williams extracted from the abovementioned email correspondence.

"I started noticing the rough running several seconds into the takeoff roll. It's my normal practice to do an engine run-up, but in all honesty I can't remember whether I did for that specific flight. I'm not certain that I did."

"Stephen...to amplify my previous answer a little. Sometime after the accident, someone mentioned they hadn't noticed me doing a mag check prior to the fated flight. I honestly can't remember now, but that information from a third party introduces an element of doubt in my mind. Hence my uncertainty..."



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Interview #1 Summary

John Hoefling
Witness

Interview date and time: October 12, 2017; 1800 PT

Mr. Hoefling stated that he, his daughter and his wife were scheduled to fly with the accident pilot. They each flew with the accident pilot individually in the aforementioned order. Mr. Hoefling reported that the pilot had difficulty starting the engine before their flight, during which time he removed the primer pump about 5 times. The flight was uneventful. His daughter was the next passenger to fly with the accident pilot. He surmised the pilot may have primed the airplane once prior to that flight, but the engine started up immediately. His daughter did not report any anomalies related to her flight.

For the third flight, the witness' wife boarded the airplane and fastened her seatbelt. The pilot attempted to start the engine, but it wouldn't start. He then removed and reinstalled the primer twice before the engine started. During the takeoff, he heard a woman standing nearby that "there's a problem with the engine and he is circling back." Mr. Hoefling reported to his daughter that the engine had a heavy sound to it, similar to a Harley Davidson motorcycle. He then observed the airplane make a wide left turn and begin a descent. The airplane appeared

stable as it descended quickly out of view. They did not observe the impact, but saw a cloud of dust.



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Interview #1 Summary

Pete Jones
Air Repair

Interview Date and Time: April 11, 2019; 1400 PT

Mr. Jones reported that he did not observe any discrepancies with the camshaft gear surfaces as the teeth fully engaged and the locknut was in place. He further added that if the teeth slipped, they would be loose. In light of this observation, he is confident that the engine is not experiencing a timing issue.



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Interview #1 Summary

Pete Mason
Witness

Interview date and time: September 11, 2017; 0818 PT

Mr. Mason, an airport employee, reported that he owns two Stearman airplanes. At the time of the event he was initially in the airport office when he heard the engine start. The witness did not see the engine run-up, but he heard the airplane takeoff and was concerned as the engine did not sound like it was functioning normally. He then went outside and observed the airplane climb westbound off runway 22 at an estimated climb rate of 50 ft/min. About 1/8 nm from the departure end of the runway 22, the airplane began a gradual left turn. The airplane's pitch attitude continued to increase during this time until the left wing dropped rapidly, but the pilot recovered the airplane and returned to a normal attitude.



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Interview #1 Summary

Ray Maxon
Aircraft Recovery Specialist

October 2017

According to the specialist who recovered the accident airplane, he observed fuel staining in the sand below the fuel tank cap in the day that followed the accident.



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Interview #1 Summary

Susan Hoefling
Front Seat Passenger of Accident Flight

Interview date and time: September 4, 2017; 1536 PT

According to Mrs. Hoefling, her and two members of her family took turns flying in the accident airplane and she was the last passenger flight. After she donned her seat belts, she observed that the pilot struggled momentarily to get the airplane started. After the airplane started, they took off and reached about 500 ft above ground level before the pilot began a 45° turn and the airplane began to descend. They touched down in dirt and the airplane flipped over inverted. The pilot later reported to her that he knew something wasn't right after they departed. He realized he would not be able to return to the runway and selected a landing site.

Interview #2 Summary

Susan Hoefling
Front Seat Passenger of Accident Flight

Interview date and time: January 28, 2019; 0900 PT

Mrs. Hoefling stated that she did not receive any briefing that would have prepared her for an emergency or even a briefing showing her how to operate the seat belt restraint system. Further, her husband and daughter didn't receive seat belt instructions prior to their flights. The pilot fastened each passengers' seat belt prior to their respective flights. As she was not prepared with an emergency exit strategy she had no idea what to do when she was suspended upside down after the accident.