

NTSB Written Statement – Accident of Citabria N8737V @ 12N on April 23, 2018 - John Tremper

On the morning of April 23, 2018, approximately 9-9:30AM I arrived at work at Aeroflex-Andover Airport and noticed Citabria 37V at the runup area for runway 03. As I opened my hangar doors I witnessed the plane take the paved runway for departure, heard the pilot apply power and believe to have heard a hesitation or stumble as it neared full power that recovered quickly. The plane accelerated and sounded normal while passing me at midfield as it lifted off. Shortly after, as the plane was approximately 100-150 agl I heard the power begin tapering off, as it did the pilot leveled off then a few seconds later performed a well executed left 180 return to the runway, landing downwind on the grass runway. During the landing rollout the engine sounded normal and the pilot taxied to the ramp parking in front of the main office and shut down. As I was working in the front area of my shop I occasionally looked out to see if he had exited the airplane but do not believe he did so for approximately 5 minutes, possibly involved on a cellphone but not certain.

About 5 minutes later the pilot came to my hangar and asked if I had time to perform a compression check as he was trying to determine the cause of the power loss. I have never worked on any of this owner's aircraft and had refused all requests by him to do so in the past due to their poor condition. I was reluctant to become involved this time as well but suggested some basic troubleshooting and would assist in looking to see if there were any obvious defects. I had assumed the pilot had performed a preflight inspection but had not witnessed that due to my arrival time. I asked the pilot if this had been the first takeoff attempt of the year, knowing that the plane had been tied down outside, parked against a treeline for at least the last 6 month period, unmoved and he replied that it was. Having witnessed the event and having experienced such events myself, instead of a compression check I suggested that there was a greater possibility that mice or other nesting animals may have placed material in the induction airbox or ducting and would be easy to identify. After this suggestion the pilot remarked, "That makes sense, as a matter of fact when I taxied to the fuel pump earlier I smelled what I thought was burning grass so we removed the top cowling to look but found none." The pilot pulled the airplane to the ramp in front of my shop and the pilot removed the full cowling. I inspected the airbox on both sides of the carb heat flap, carburetor throat and heat duct which was screen equipped and noticed no foreign material however the intake cuff was moderately deteriorated and installed incorrectly, clamped to the airbox instead of the cowl. I provided the pilot a new clamp to rectify that situation but did not observe him perform the work. While looking at the airbox I witnessed the #3 cylinder exhaust stack hanging about 1/4" away from the cylinder flange with no gasket, washers or nuts present. I suggested the owner replace the gaskets and hardware and supplied him with these items. I also looked up the exhaust tailpipe to check for baffle condition and see if there was any blockage, no defects were noted.

Between the troubleshooting findings and subsequent corrections being made I returned my focus back into the shop to continue working on the project I was involved with. I was hoping he would be able to perform most of the basic correction tasks unassisted but he was frequently interrupted receiving or making outgoing phone calls or messages, so I supervised and assisted as necessary.

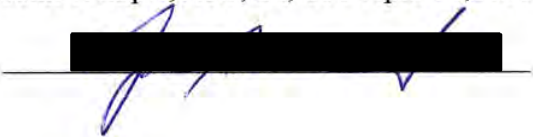
As I returned outside and looked at the other side of the engine I noticed the main fuel supply line was fabricated out of unreinforced automotive fuel or coolant hose, clearly labeled "Gates" that was pinched nearly closed on approximately a 70 degree angle due to too tight of a curve attempted in too small a distance because of fitting misalignment. I was very uncomfortable with that installation

and suggested we install a standard aviation fuel hose with AN fittings to continue troubleshooting, the pilot agreed. I asked him to shut the fuel valve off to be able to replace the hose. After we changed the hose out I recommended the pilot perform a full throttle runup for at least a full minute. Very little gas was spilled during the replacement but I did notice it took the pilot three attempts to start the plane. I heard the runup as again I continued to work inside my shop and it seemed steady with no anomalies. The pilot then came in the shop and stated that it seemed ok and asked if the items we found could have contributed to some other power loss related events he had over the past year and I honestly didn't clearly follow his descriptions but did agree they could have been contributors.

At this time I became involved with a phone call at my desk in the rear of my hangar, away from the door so did not witness or even know that he fully recowled the plane. The pilot came back and gestured during my phone call if he owed any money but I waved him off for the moment as I was trying to listen to two people at once and had never suggested our troubleshooting was complete as so little had been looked at and made no implications that it be flown. Unknown to me the pilot started the plane up and taxied back to runway 03 for another flight attempt.

I did not observe the accident sequence at all still being at my desk and it was difficult to differentiate one airplane sound from another because there was at least one other airplane in the pattern at the time but I quickly realized that the pilot must have taken off again when I heard the same power reduction with about the same timing as originally occurred earlier. As I quickly made my way to my door facing the runway I heard the substantial impact. I raced to the end of the runway by car looking for the wreckage, when Airport Manager John Flyntz arrived at my location he directed our focus on the impact point on the lake and we observed the pilot emerge from under water, the plane had already completely submerged. Again, I quickly drove a few hundred feet away to a boat rental hut, freeing a rowboat and getting it into the water as police and other first responders arrived who rowed out to the pilot to complete the rescue.

John Tremper, A&P, IA, CFI April 30, 2018



Statement of April 23rd, 2018 Crash on Lake Aeroflex at Aeroflex Andover Airport

Dated: April 27th, 2018

On April 23, 2018 I arrived at Aeroflex-Andover Airport to ready our UH-1H Huey for the daily activities of the NJ Forest Fire Service Airbase. At 9:30AM John Wells taxied his Bellanca Citabria N8737V to the fuel system. After putting 13 gallons of 100LL into the aircraft John Wells requested two screwdrivers to remove the top cowling. John Wells thought there may be a birds nest on the engine. No debris was found.

Shortly after 10:00 AM John Wells took off from runway 03. Shortly after take off John Wells turned a 180 degrees back to runway 21 and landed on the grass strip under power. John Wells then taxied the aircraft onto the apron.

At approximately 10:30AM John Wells had a conversation with John Tremper as to why the aircraft had diminished power on the earlier take off at 10:00AM. John Wells decowled the engine. John Tremper agreed to assist in troubleshooting by looking to check if there was anything obviously wrong. John Tremper checked the carburetor intake to see if there was any obstruction, no obstruction was found. The right rear exhaust stack mounting studs had no nuts and there was no gasket. Gasket and nuts were installed. On the left side of the carburetor an automotive type fuel hose with hose clamps was found and it was kinked. An aircraft fuel hose was installed. John Wells ran it up for a full minute at full power. Engine seemed to run normally.

John Wells then took off on runway 03. The aircraft veered slightly to the right, the engine seemed to sputter and stall at approximately 200 feet. The aircraft broke to the left and descended at a sharp angle. At the last second John Wells leveled the aircraft just before impacting Lake Aeroflex. Rescue operations ensued.

John T. Flyntz
Airport Manager
NJ Forest Fire Service

