

Fabian Salazar
Air Safety Investigator
Western Pacific Region

Date: February 17, 2022

Subject: WPR22FA098 / Record of Conversation

Contact: Eric Ristrim / Fixed Wing Pilot

In a telephone interview, Mr. Ristrim stated that he was flying an airplane on the night of the accident, and he not only was involved in the search for the accident pilot but was the person who found him. He said that the moon was full, and the visibility was unlimited.

He stated that he got his helicopter rating about 5 years ago and the accident pilot checked him in the accident helicopter. He said he flew with the accident pilot for about 6 or 7 hours. Mr. Ristrim stated that the accident pilot was a by-the-book, outstanding pilot who did not take chances. He stated that during ferry flights, the accident pilot insisted that it be flown at 500 feet [above ground level (agl)]. He recalled a flight where he was at 300 feet agl and the accident pilot corrected him to fly at 500 feet agl.

With regards to crossing powerlines, Mr. Ristrim stated that it was common practice to fly under some powerlines during day and night conditions; however, he said that in the area where the accident occurred, the pilot would not have flown under those powerlines, the trees were too tall. He also stated that in the area where the accident occurred, there were three sets of towers that run through it and the accident pilot was well aware of them. From prior flying with the accident pilot, Mr. Ristrim was confident that the accident pilot would have been at 500 feet agl if he were flying to Harris Ranch. When asked, because of the high moon illumination, and the ease of spotting the towers that night, would the pilot have considered flying low level to Harris Ranch, he stated "no, not below 500 feet, because of the powerlines."

He stated that while working, if it was too windy to spray, and you were going to be sitting around for 30 minutes, it was not uncommon for the pilots to fly to Harris Ranch airport and

walk over to the gas station for a break. He said that the pilot would have parked the helicopter in the grass area just east of the parking tie downs for airplanes.

He stated that the helicopter was equipped with supplemental lights that are used for night spraying. He said that the pilots do not ferry around at night with the lights on because the lights were adjusted for spraying and the adjustment has the beam pointing too high up [for straight and level flight]; however, he stated that if the pilot were responding to an emergency, he would have turned those lights on.

Fabian Salazar
Air Safety Investigator
Western Pacific Region

Date: February 22, 2022

Subject: WPR22FA098 / Record of Conversation

Contact: Shari Wilson / Wife of the pilot

In a telephone interview, Ms. Wilson stated that the pilot was fine until the night of Valentine's Day, February 14th. She said that he told her that he had used a home-test for COVID and the test was positive. She told him, "Don't go to work" but he assured her that he would not be around anyone. She said that he was acting fine but did say that he was sick.

She stated that her husband did not drink or smoke. She said that he had sent her a photo of him using a breathing treatment, but she didn't know if he was joking. When contacted on February 23rd, she stated that the pilot's daughter lived with him and she would better know about the pilot's health and rest.

Fabian Salazar
Air Safety Investigator
Western Pacific Region

Date: February 17, 2022

Subject: WPR22FA098 / Record of Conversation

Contact: Raul Meza / Ground Crew Supervisor

In an interview Mr. Meza stated that his job includes checking fields to make sure that it is clear before they start working, coordinate with the pilot and make sure that everything is going well. He said that if the winds are over about 13 to 15 miles per hour they would not spray. Mr. Meza reported that there were a total of three employees on the ground supporting the operations. He detailed the pilot's plan to conduct operations over five separate parcels of land, Compos 1, and 2, RRS, Walker, and Simonich.

Mr. Meza stated that at the first location (Compose 1 and 2) everything was normal, the ground crews were joking with the pilot and the pilot was making jokes with the ground crews. He said that in coordinating with the pilot he advised him that there were wires and trees around, so the pilot told him he would fly high. The pilot completed the Compose 1 and 2 jobs and departed for RRS Farms.

He said that the pilot began to work the RRS field and after a couple of loads it started getting windy. About 2130, he called the RRS field off [cancelled the RRS application] and stated, "let's go to the last set up." Mr. Meza stated that David was at the last location (Simonich Farms) and radioed to the pilot that the wind was the same as at the last location. The pilot asked over the radio "How'd you check that?" Mr. Meza thought that the pilot's question was odd because he knew how the ground crew checked the wind, and he called David and told him that. David responded that he was probably just cold because the pilot had previously stated that he was cold.

Mr. Meza stated that they waited for the pilot until about 2200 and then called the boss (Mr. Perez) and told him that the pilot had not showed up. He said that he spoke

with three people who all saw the pilot heading southeast (the correct direction for transitioning from RRS to Simonich).

Mr. Meza stated that the cops got involved and pin-dropped his cell phone, then Eric found him.

Mr. Meza stated that the last time he talked to the pilot was about 2138. He stated that he spoke to someone near Harris's and asked if they had seen a helicopter flying by there and they stated yes, about 2130 or 2135.

Mr. Meza explained that the pilot did a "ferry load" northwest of the Compose Farms job, After the pilot finished the Compos job and went to the RRS Farms job, and cancelled that job. There was another location (Walker Farms) that was closer to Interstate 5 (west of RRS Farms) the pilot cancelled that job and directed the crew to the last job (Simonich Farms).

Mr. Meza stated that around 2126, he was near the streets, Mt. Whitney and Colusa, and called another crew to find out how they were doing. He saw the helicopter heading to the last field, and when he hung up the phone, he did not see him again. He said that he parked his truck at near Oakland and Colusa and radioed the pilot to tell him that it was still windy here. That was when he heard the "How'd you check it" statement from the pilot.

Mr. Meza, with the assistance of Mr. Perez explained how the ground crews supported the locations. He stated that David was responsible for Compos Farms (location #1) Marcos and Raul assisted him. Marcos left Campos and travelled to RRS. Raul travelled to The Compos ferry load location (location #2).

Marcos was responsible for RRS Farms (location #3). David and Raul assisted him. David then travelled to Walker Farms (location #4). After the pilot called off RRS, he flew over Walker Farms and cancelled that job. David then travelled to Simonich Farms (location #5). Raul was travelling to Simonich Farms when he pulled over on Colusa and Oakland to check the wind with a wind meter, about the time that David radioed the pilot and told him that the winds were the same at the Simonich location. Mr. Meza checked the wind and radioed the wind speed to the pilot about the time that the pilot asked, "How'd you check it?"

Mr. Meza realized that the pilot was questioning David and how he checked the wind because David did not have a wind meter, Mr. Meza did, and the pilot knew that.

When asked where the actual location was in relation to the map, Mr. Meza indicated that the pilot was about 6 miles southwest of the Simonich Farms location. When

asked to point out the direction of the American West Aviation location, Mr. Meza indicated on a map. The location was not near the accident site. When asked what was in the direction that the helicopter was heading, Mr. Meza stated Harris Ranch Inn & Restaurant. Mr. Perez stated that Harris Ranch had an air strip and a convenience store and that the pilot had been going there for years. He stated that was the only place that he would have gone. When asked if the pilot could have gotten lost, both Mr. Perez and Mr. Meza stated no, that the pilot had been flying in the area for years.

Mr. Meza stated that he didn't think the pilot would have gone down to Harris Ranch without telling them. When asked, under normal circumstances, if the pilot needed anything like batteries, would it be reasonable for the pilot to ask the field finder to get them, Mr. Meza stated that "every time he needed something he would ask me." Mr. Perez stated that it was not normal for the pilot to just takeoff to the store without telling the ground crew. Mr. Perez stated that it is not normal for the pilot to take a load of pesticides to the Harris Ranch. He then stated that the tank was not rinsed with water and at the end of the job the tank is usually rinsed out three times with water.

When asked to clarify any unusual radio communications on the night of the accident, Mr. Meza stated that in the beginning, the crew was messing around normally with the pilot. He said that towards the end of the RRS Farms job is when things changed, and the pilot said that he was cold. Jokingly, one of the ground crew stated that they could throw David in the seat to keep him warm, and the pilot only replied "no." Mr. Meza stated that the pilot was "never that serious, never." Mr. Meza then stated that the way he questioned the wind was unusual, because the pilot's replied with short answers.

Mr. Meza stated that when he was at Compos Farms, the wind was about 5 mph, and it picked up in speed, and the pilot said that above the trees the wind was pretty bad and that he couldn't do it.

Mr. Perez made a statement that the pilot was not one to forget his jacket or his lunch. He said that the pilot was always ready 100% of the time.

When reviewing the locations one final time, Mr. Meza briefed the locations of the ground crews, and stated that it was while overflying the Walker Farms location that the pilot stated to David "it's too windy, I can't do it." David then relocated to Simonich Farms. Mr. Meza then began to travel to the Simonich Farms location, and about 2126, he called a different crew to hear how they were doing. About 2130 the pilot told Marco its too windy, I can't do it anymore."Mr. Meza then stopped at an area near Colusa and Oakland and checked the wind. He radioed to the pilot that the winds were the same right after David had radioed the pilot to tell him the winds were the same at Simonich. The pilot radioed back "How'd you check it?"

When asked about communicating with the pilot while he was transitioning from location #2 and Location #3, Mr. Meza stated that the distance was about 25 miles and there was non-work-related communication with the pilot, and he was in good spirits. Mr. Meza recalled that it was probably about the time that David was relocating from Walker Farms to Simonich Farms that Marcos joked with the pilot and offered to put David in the cockpit to warm the pilot, that the pilot just gave the short "no" statement.

It was determined that the five locations, in the order of the plan to service then were:

1. Compos Farms
2. Compos Farms 2 (Ferry Load)
3. RRS Farms
4. Walker Farms
5. Simonich Farms

Fabian Salazar
Air Safety Investigator
Western Pacific Region

Date: February 17, 2022

Subject: WPR22FA098 / Record of Conversation

Contact: Marco Garcia / Ground Crew Member

In an interview taken at the Operator's office, with Mr. Alex Perez present, Mr. Garcia (Marco) stated that he was a mixer and loader. He drove the mix trucks out to the fields and parks the truck so that the helicopter can land on it. He loads the chemicals into the tank and provide fuel when the pilot asks for it.

He stated that they got started about 2030 and had three areas to work that evening. He said that his brother (David) had responsibility to service the first location (Location #1 Compos and #2, Compose ferry load). He helped him set up, then departed to go to the third location (RRS Farms) which he was responsible to service.

He said that he checked the wind at the third location and set up the truck for the helicopter to land into the wind. He also applied some water on the ground to keep the dust down. He stated that they had 16 loads to do at that location. He had made "a bunch of mixes", and he told the pilot that they had 11 loads left. The pilot stated that everything was good. At 8 loads left Marco told the pilot that they were halfway done. The pilot replied that everything was good. He stated that the pilot took half a load, and it started to get windy. The pilot had him disconnect and then took off into the wind. Marco said that he thought that the pilot flew over some wires because he initially climbed then descend as if he were going to land. He thought that the pilot may have flown to the next site [location #4, Walker Farms] because David was there. He stated that he called David who told him the pilot never flew over there.

Marco stated that he could not travel due to having material in the tanks. He said the pilot told him that he would try his field (RRS Farms) tomorrow.

He said that he did not check the winds, but it was gusty, and that was what was bothering the pilot because he was having trouble. Mr. Perez added that they have a wind limit of ten mph.

Marco stated that the pilot usually will tell the ground crew when they are going to take a break, but he the pilot did not say anything about taking a break.

In a review of the last load the pilot took, Marco said that the pilot had plenty of fuel and did not take on fuel. Marco could see that he had half a load of chemicals because there was a sight tube on the side of the tank, and at that point the pilot told him to cut it. He said that he disconnected the chemical hose, and the pilot said he would do this field tomorrow and then took off. Marco thought it weird because they were not done. He called the field finder and asked him if he was supposed to leave his truck on the site because he still had chemicals in the tank. He called David and David said that he hadn't seen him, so Marco assumed that the pilot went to Harris Ranch to take a break, but he didn't tell them. He re-stated that the pilot took on a half of a load and just left. Mr. Perez stated that when things like this happen, the pilot usually communicates with the ground crew and gives them an explanation.

Marco stated that when they were about halfway done, the pilot said that the heater wasn't working. Marco stated that during communications, the pilot would already be talking when he keyed the microphone and would release the microphone before he stopped communicating. Marco didn't know if it was the pilot doing that or the radio. Marco stated the wind was predicted to calm down in a few hours and they could have completed the job that night.

Marco thought that they worked about 1 hour, but the wind was slowing the pilot down. He thought that it was about 2030.

Marco stated that the pilot cancelled the Walker Farms (Location #4) but he did not give a reason. David then went to the last location (Simonich, Location #5)

Fabian Salazar
Air Safety Investigator
Western Pacific Region

Date: February 17, 2022

Subject: WPR22FA098 / Record of Conversation

Contact: David Garcia / Ground Crew Member

In an interview taken at the Operator's office, with Mr. Alex Perez present, Mr. Garcia (David) confirmed that he was a mixer and loader and had been working about 4 years with the operator.

He stated that he was scheduled to show up at the operator about 1400, and the pilot showed up about 1630. The ground crews went to the first location and started mixing the chemicals. The pilot radioed the file finder and had him "drop-pin" their location because the GPS was acting up. He said that they did 16 loads at the first location (Compos Farms) and 2 loads at the second location (Compos Ferry Load). He stated that when he got to the third location (RRS Farms) they [Marco and Raul] had barely gotten started. While there David asked the pilot "how much more do you have here?" so he would know when to leave for the next field. The pilot stated that he had about 12 or 13 loads left. David then told the pilot that he was going to the next site (Location #4, Walker Farms).

David said that he left the RRS Farms location and went to the Walker Farms location about 1.5 miles west. He set up and then radioed to the pilot asking him if he wanted to come check the spot where David set the truck. David mentioned that there were very high wires on the north side of the Walker Farms location. He said that the pilot told him he would check it. He said that the pilot flew out to the field and said "nope were not going to do it, cancel that job, well do it tomorrow. Head over to Simonich." While on the road to Simonich, David said that he heard Marco, state over the radio, "eight loads left" and the pilot replied, "OK got it, eight loads left."

While still on the road David heard the pilot state "that's it I'm going, I'm having trouble lining up with the truck, I cannot finish for the day, were going to call it at that." Marco

stated, "alright Steve, you have six and a half left." Steve replied "Alright I have half a load left, 18 acres, we'll finish up tomorrow. Marco replied, "No, you have six and a half", Steve replied again, "one half load left, we'll finish up tomorrow."

While still on his way to the Simonich Farms, David stated that he last saw the helicopter lifting off, making the passenger-side turn toward the south, over the wires, and levelling out. He was still driving to the Simonich Farms at that time.

David said that he got to the northwest side of the location and checked the wind. He radioed to the pilot that "the wind was pretty much the same, northwest about the same speed." David did not have a wind meter. He said that he kicked up some dirt to determine the wind. He said the Raul got there about the same time and had made a radio call before the pilot could answer and stated that "the wind was the same about 17 mph." The last thing David heard the pilot say was "how'd you check that?" Raul replied, "with the wind meter." There were no further transmissions from the pilot.

David stated that while enroute to Simonich Farms he texted the pilot and asked him if everything was OK. While at Simonich, David radioed Marco asking if the helicopter was still at RRS Farms. Marco replied that he was not. David stated that it wasn't unusual for the pilot to take a break, so he waited for a short period. He called him on his cell phone and the call rang a few times then went to voice mail. After that he said that they called Alex, their supervisor because they were all worried.

When asked about the first job (16 loads at Compos Farms) David said that nothing unusual happened at that time. He said that the pilot was acting normal and being himself. David mentioned the pilot would occasionally do a "little dance" while seated in the helicopter, and he did that there at the first job. He stated that everything seemed normal.

David said that the pilot might have been wearing a sweater but was wearing a beanie and must have known that it was going to get cold, because he normally flew in just a T-shirt.

When asked about the pilot stating that the heater wasn't working, David stated that the pilot said that when he flew over the Walker Farms location and said, "It's too windy, F- that, I'm not going to do it. It's too cold and my heater is acting up." David recalled that they were about halfway through the RRS Farms job when the pilot flew over the Walker Farms.

When asked about the powerlines that the pilot was flying over, David stated that during the RRS Farms site, the truck was parked north of the field and north of a slew that had powerlines. He stated that they were the big tower powerlines.

When asked about the large lights and how the pilot uses them, David stated that he uses them during the passes and when he initially takes off from the truck. He said that it is not common for him to use the lights from field to field. Mr. Perez stated that the pilot uses the lights when making the passes and uses the strobe lights when he is transitioning from field to field.

Fabian Salazar
Air Safety Investigator
Western Pacific Region

Date: February 17, 2022

Subject: WPR22FA098 / Record of Conversation

Contact: Caitlin Wilson / Daughter of the pilot

In a telephone interview, Ms. Wilson stated that she lived with her father, and she was probably the best person to provide a 72-hour study of her father.

She stated that she knew that he wasn't feeling good. She said that her father told her that he had bought a home-test for COVID, but he didn't tell her if the results. She stated that on Super Bowl Sunday her father was asking her sister about the symptoms she had when she had COVID and said things like "yeah, I have that too."

Ms. Wilson stated that on Valentine's Day, she and her sister made dinner with her father and "he was very tired and barely hanging on." He went to bed immediately after dinner. She recalled that he slept at least until 0800 when she left the house and was gone upon her return later in the day.

When asked about the breathing treatment, she stated that he had that for years but never saw him use it.

Fabian Salazar
Air Safety Investigator
Western Pacific Region

Date: February 17, 2022

Subject: WPR22FA098 / Record of Conversation

Contact: Cesar A. Perez / Ground Crew Foreman

In an interview conducted at the Operator's office, Mr. Perez stated that he supervised the ground crew. He coordinates with the ground crew and helps with jobsite organization. He does some coordination with the pilot. He used either his phone or a company radio.

His job activities include organization of maps and work orders and field site organization. He also ensures the ground crew has provisions for the days, water, chemicals, etc. He meets with the crew and details the events for the day or the night. He does not set up the GP in the helicopter.

He explained that for the helicopter, the crew consisted of a Field Spotter (Field Finder, Bull spotter), Raul Meza, who's duties include getting to the correct field, ensuring that no one is in the field, and the water is not on, and the material being applied is the correct product. There were two big-rig trucks that carried jet fuel, water, and chemicals for the job. The drivers were Marco Garcia and his younger brother David Garcia.

Mr. Perez explained the reason for the two trucks was so that there would be one truck positioned at the first job site before the helicopter arrives, while the second truck would be at the next jobsite waiting for the helicopter to arrive. The trucks would leap-frog to the subsequent jobsites. This allowed for the helicopter to not have to stop and wait for a truck to arrive. He also explained that the crews would often meet at one jobsite to assist in getting ready for the arrival of the helicopter. Mr. Perez explained that the ground crews do some coordination with the property owner if there is a problem such as the water being on.

After much discussion and clarification, it was understood that the pilot had five areas to service on the night of the accident. The first location was called Compose. The second location was known as Compose Ferry Load. The third was known as RRS. The fourth was known as Walker, and the fifth was known as Simonich.

Mr. Perez stated that the crew gave him a call around 2200 and stated that the pilot did not show up to the fifth location. Mr. Perez called one of the operator's fixed wing pilots (Eric Wristrim) to let him know that they had lost contact with the pilot. The fixed wing pilot started the search for the helicopter pilot. Mr. Perez called 911 and relayed the news. He knew the general location of the pilot, but not exactly where he was at. He stated that about ten vehicles in all searched for the pilot. The search lasted 2.5 to 3 hours. He stated that Debbie and her husband found the helicopter. The Sheriff department used cell phone data to help locate the pilot. Eric was the first to spot the helicopter, then Debbie and her husband were the first to locate the helicopter on the ground.

Mr. Perez detailed some of what was reported to him by the ground crews. He stated that while the pilot was servicing RRS, he decided to stop spraying the field, and stated that they would finish it the following day. He also heard that the pilot sounded a little disoriented, "like he wasn't Steve." Mr. Perez stated that it wasn't unusual to leave a location before finishing it, but the pilot sounded confused on the number of loads left, and he was usually very aware of the loads left to be applied. He agreed that it was odd that the crew would have to tell him that information.

When asked about a rumor that the pilot accidentally sprayed the ground crew three times, Mr. Perez stated, yes, David told him that the pilot had sprayed them a couple of times. Mr. Perez did not ask why or the circumstances. He said that it was not normal for the pilot to spray the crew. He said that they could have been too close to the field, or the wind could have pushed the spray over them.

Mr. Perez stated that he did not speak to the pilot that evening but did text him about some of the job particulars.

Mr. Perez stated that the pilot hot refuels, and that the pilot doesn't take fuel every load. He did not know the fuel amount for that evening but said that usually he refuels before relocating to a new job location. He said that the loaders do not log the amount of fuel that they put in the helicopter, and they stop fueling when the pilot gives him a hand signal.

Fabian Salazar
Air Safety Investigator
Western Pacific Region

Date: February 17, 2022

Subject: WPR22FA098 / Record of Conversation

Contact: Ashley Spainhoward/ Office Manager / Inland Aviation

In a telephone interview Mrs. Spainhoward stated that she was the office manager for Inland Aviation, a company the accident pilot inherited from his father, after the father passed away. She stated that she last spoke with the pilot on February 15th, and he told her that he had tested positive for COVID. He told her that he was coming to the office to collect documents for an upcoming airplane sale, but he would not go inside the office. She placed the documents outside but did go out to talk to the pilot.

She asked the pilot why he did not go home and take some time off. He told her that it was just him in the helicopter and that he would be fine. She said that he did say that he was feeling under the weather.

When asked about stressors, she confirmed that Inland Aviation was dealing with the fatal vehicle accident that occurred about July 8, 2021, which resulted in a lawsuit being filed against Inland Aviation, and a fatal aviation accident that occurred about November 3, 2021. She reported that the pilot's marriage was a big stressor for him. She stated that he managed a family-owned ranch called the Ocuya Creek Ranch.