

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

NATIONAL TRANSPORTATION SAFETY BOARD

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Investigation of: *

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FATAL GATES LEARJET CRASH *

NEAR SAN CLEMENTE ISLAND, *

CALIFORNIA ON MAY 10, 2023 *

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Accident No.: WPR23FA185

Interview of: JOHN KOOKEGY, Special Missions Technician
Phoenix Air Group

Cartersville, Georgia

Thursday,
June 1, 2023

APPEARANCES:

DAN BAKER, Investigator in Charge
National Transportation Safety Board

PAUL RHO, Air Safety Investigator
National Transportation Safety Board

MIKE LEMAY, Chief Air Safety Investigator
Bombardier

SCOTT CHILDS, Principal Maintenance Inspector for
Phoenix Air Group
Federal Aviation Administration

DARRIN BENTON, Director, Operations
Phoenix Air Group
Representative

RICKEY SMITH, Director, Aircraft Services
Phoenix Air Group

I N D E X

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I N T E R V I E W

MR. BAKER: Good morning, it's May 25th, we are conducting an interview with John Kookegy at Phoenix Air --

MR. RHO: June 1st.

MR. LEMAY: June 1st.

MR. BAKER: Oh, is today June 1st?

MR. LEMAY: June 1st.

MR. BAKER: All right, June 1st. I'm not awake yet. This is Dan Baker with the NTSB and I'm the Investigator in Charge.

MR. RHO: I'm Paul Rho, Air Safety Investigator with the NTSB.

MR. LEMAY: Mike Lemay, Chief Air Safety Investigator at Bombardier.

MR. CHILDS: Scott Childs, FAA, Principal Maintenance Inspector for Phoenix Air.

MR. SMITH: Rickey Smith, Director of Aircraft Services, Phoenix Air.

MR. KOOKEGY: John Kookegy, I'm a Special Missions Technician, Phoenix Air.

MR. BENTON: And I'm Darrin Benton, Director of Operations, Phoenix Air.

INTERVIEW OF JOHN KOOKEGY

BY MR. BAKER:

Q. Thanks, John. If you could, if you could just start, you know, when you got the mission and what the purpose of the mission

1 was and kind of walk through your activities with the -- with the
2 other air crew up and through the accident flight, if you don't
3 mind.

4 A. When we left here?

5 Q. Yeah.

6 A. I was assigned to Aircraft 544 as a special missions tech and
7 the Friday before we left, which would've been the 5th, I prepared
8 Aircraft 544 for a mission to Point Mugu, California, and we were
9 going to be working with U.S. ship -- I can't -- LCS 32, was it?
10 I kind of forget.

11 Q. That's all right.

12 A. So our mission was that we were -- I had outfitted the
13 airplane with IFF, APX-123 or inverters to operate pods. We took
14 one AST-9 with us, mounted on the left wing, and that was it. So
15 that was -- so we just did preparations, checked the COMMs,
16 checked all the equipment that we installed to -- as we usually
17 do, make sure everything's working. So I did that on Friday
18 because we were leaving on Monday, the 8th.

19 So Monday, the 8th, I can't remember what time we left,
20 sometime in the morning, 9 o'clock maybe, typically, and what we
21 did was we flew to Amarillo and landed in Amarillo, refueled, we
22 ate lunch and then flew out to Point Mugu and probably got to
23 Point Mugu about 1:00 p.m. Pacific Time, where we met our
24 coordinator, Clayton Hill (ph.). Then the pod that we took out
25 there was inoperable, so we were taking it out, ferrying that pod

1 out, and the pod shop at Point Mugu met us with a new pod, so we
2 swapped those out, so that Monday afternoon, we swapped the pods
3 out, tested it, and they took that back to the shop. And so then
4 we were off after that, we went to our hotel.

5 We had a mission on Tuesday, which was like a typical
6 mission, with the ship and from what I remember, it was just a
7 mission with -- the purpose of it was for -- kind of at a loss for
8 words, the AST-9 is a -- not a jamming pod, it's a -- a threat --
9 a threat simulator pod. So we were working with the ship and
10 everything went normally, probably about a 3-hour mission, and
11 then when we -- we returned to Point Mugu and we were done, then,
12 for the day, we went back to our hotel.

13 While we were at the hotel, the crew from 56 arrived at Point
14 Mugu and we got a text from Shane, the backseat guy in that place,
15 the text that I got, it said, "Where are you at?" because it was
16 -- they were talking about getting ready to go out to eat dinner.
17 And I just said well, I'm in my room. So we all met, I think it
18 was at 5 o'clock, the two crews, to go eat at a pizza place there,
19 had dinner, we were probably there a couple hours.

20 Came back to the hotel and then, I think, prepared for a 7
21 o'clock takeoff or sometime around there, it's hard for me to
22 remember the time, but probably left the hotel before 7:00. And
23 so then we went back to the base, Point Mugu, and both planes were
24 -- we were just preparing both planes. I didn't have to do
25 anything to mine because we -- well, either plane didn't have to

1 do anything because we were only doing a loss mission, which is
2 just a GPS tracking mission. So we took off out of Point Mugu and
3 I typically, when I set up my seat in the back, I'm all the way in
4 the back on the right side and I have my IFF equipment on the left
5 side, I have a spectrum analyzer in front of me on a table, and
6 the inverters are behind me in a pod on the wing, but we weren't
7 going to use the pod so that -- it was just still on the wing.

8 So we took off and the only thing I had to do is just turn
9 our computers on, our WASP computers, and I just kind of sat back
10 and was (indiscernible) and we caught up to the other plane, so we
11 were flying in formation to the ship and I have, in the back, we
12 have communications with -- I can hear ATC, I can hear the other
13 plane, I can hear, you know, our own ICS and everything.

14 And so I'm just -- I'm plugged in and I'm just listening to
15 them and we had been flying for however many -- I don't even
16 remember, 20 minutes or something or -- but I can always, you
17 know, look out and see the plane over there and I heard our
18 captain, Matt Conway, say "Did you just put your flaps down?" and
19 I didn't think much about it, you know.

20 And I don't remember if there was a response or anything, but
21 -- and I don't -- didn't know until after the fact that the flaps
22 did come back up again, I never saw any of that, I was just
23 hearing. And then -- I don't remember what was first, whether
24 Matt saw smoke or hydraulic fluid and he was, I mean, definitely
25 concerned, he was saying you got -- you got hydraulic fluid coming

1 out, you know, down your belly and that's when I started -- I got
2 out of my seat and I was -- being all the way in the back, I was
3 kind of on the side, on the left side of the airplane and looking
4 out the window, so I'm kind of looking up that way. I couldn't
5 see, really, the hydraulic fluid, but about the same time, you
6 could just see white smoke coming out of -- to me, when I think
7 about it, I just -- I see the white smoke coming out of the tail,
8 you know, I couldn't tell where it was coming from, I was thinking
9 that definitely wasn't an engine, but it just looked like it was
10 just -- I think that when I look at planes now, it must've been
11 coming out, there's some vents back there.

12 And I also heard Ian, the copilot, say that he thought he was
13 seeing like liquid with the smoke and I couldn't -- I definitely
14 could see the smoke, by that time I could see hydraulic fluid
15 coming up the back and so I was just kind of glued to the window,
16 just looking at it. But right when all that stuff happened,
17 Eric Tatman, from the other plane, the captain, he said oh, yeah,
18 we smell something in the cabin.

19 And probably right about, within seconds then, Matt Conway,
20 our captain, said -- he always says dude, he was like, "Dude, you
21 got flames coming out of the hell hole," which is the aft
22 equipment bay, and I could see that, I could see like flames that
23 look like they're about maybe the length of the door back there
24 and when I saw that, it really -- it really got like scary,
25 thinking oh, my gosh, there's something serious going on, because

1 at first, I was thinking oh, we have a hydraulic leak, we're going
2 to have to turn around and go back, about a million things went
3 through my mind like we're going to have to go back to Point Mugu,
4 probably have to get a mechanic to fly out here or whatever, this
5 mission's scrubbed and stuff and -- but within seconds, you know,
6 I realized that it's a lot more than that.

7 So Matt told Eric, he said you have to declare an emergency
8 and we got to land. And so San Clemente Island, we were like
9 right beside it and they have a runway right up on the north side
10 of it, and so -- and Eric did, he declared an emergency and he
11 started a left turn and right where I could -- I could -- we were
12 -- they were turning left, so we were turning left and I don't
13 remember when this was, but I also -- I don't remember if it was
14 after the turn or before the turn, the drag chute just departed
15 the aircraft, it just -- you know, it's like what the heck was
16 that?

17 And then, so we were -- Eric, the captain from the other
18 plane, said, "Stay ahead of us so you can" -- I think he said so
19 we can follow you in, so we can get guided in here and -- so we
20 did and I also remember him saying "and keep your speed up,"
21 because, you know, we're going fast. So I just happened to look
22 at -- so I'm looking out the left and I lost them because now
23 they're below us, but I looked out the very aft left window and I
24 could see them go right under us, a lot faster than what we were
25 going and I told Matt, our captain, I said I thought they were

1 supposed -- we're supposed to stay ahead of them, they just went
2 under us, and right at that time, then, Matt said, asked if -- he
3 said are you still with us and Eric said barely, and that was the
4 last thing, I think, that we heard him say and when I saw him
5 flying under, that was the last time that we actually saw them.

6 So I think that we were still on a path to go to that runway,
7 but then Matt Conway started talking to -- was it Beaver there --
8 to ask them if -- if they spotted them, you know, do you still
9 have radar contact with them, and this is just stuff that I'm
10 hearing and they said yeah, we have them, I think it was -- by
11 that time, it was like down around the south part of the island
12 and so we had kept going straight, maybe thinking that they were
13 still behind us but in the meantime, they went this way and when
14 we realized it, then we turned around to come back and start
15 looking for them and that's when we started thinking, oh,
16 something bad happened.

17 And so we didn't have any more contact with them and we
18 spent, I don't even know how long, an hour or so, just flying all
19 over the place, just looking for anything, and the only thing that
20 we saw, which we couldn't -- we were thinking that's -- this isn't
21 it, it was discoloration in the water that wasn't a very big area
22 and I remember Ian, our copilot, saying, he was just like oh, God,
23 oh, God, that's it, that's it and Matt was like no, we don't know
24 that, you know, we don't -- we don't -- we can't -- can't confirm
25 that or whatever. And so we flew around that area a little bit

1 and we kind of got, we got down lower to see if we could see
2 anything and I was right at the window and I said oh, I can
3 definitely see like oil or fuel or something on the surface of the
4 water, but only like, couldn't see like anything, if I were to be
5 guessing, like softball-sized pieces of garbage or something, you
6 know, and I was thinking yeah, I don't know, you know. But after
7 -- you know, after flying around -- and there was some Cessna or
8 something that was in the area that was actually, I think, just
9 going to San Clemente to pick somebody up and they were flying
10 around a little bit, helping and confirming that yeah, we see this
11 discoloration in the water and I think they had to go land.

12 And then a -- I think it was a border patrol plane was coming
13 into the area, I think, for the purpose of doing a search and I'm
14 not quite sure how this worked -- excuse me, worked out, maybe
15 there was a Coast Guard helicopter or something on its way out
16 there, but we stayed out there kind of in charge of it until it --
17 until the Coast Guard got out there and then they told us to go.

18 Our original intentions were that we were going to go land in
19 San Diego and refuel and fly back home and Matt said well, we have
20 fuel just to go back to Point Mugu, so I think that they had
21 gotten a hold of Phoenix Air and somebody made the decision no,
22 just go ahead and go to San Diego, which actually is Brown Field
23 in San Diego, so we were released from that area and we went and
24 landed at Brown Field and when we landed and we shut the engines
25 off, I think we lost the -- it was very emotional and -- but I'll

1 tell you what, and this is the thing I say all the time, it was
2 like I always feel in hugely capable hands at Phoenix Air. I've
3 only been here about five years, but whenever I return from a
4 trip, I always tell the pilots, you know, thanks for keeping me
5 safe. And I know that when I think back about that, I think about
6 especially Matt Conway, he was in complete control that entire
7 time through everything that was happening and it wasn't until we
8 landed and shut the engines off, until he just broke down. And
9 all of us did, because we were just holding those emotions in.
10 But I don't know how far you want me to go with this, but --

11 Q. I think that's probably good. I did have a couple questions
12 for you.

13 A. Um-hum.

14 Q. When you met with the crew prior to the day of the flight,
15 the accident flight, did they mention any squawks or any
16 maintenance issues with the airplane?

17 A. No. No.

18 Q. Are you aware of any maintenance that may have taken place?

19 A. No, I'm not aware. But I do always -- not necessarily of the
20 other -- other plane, but I always do ask if I missed something,
21 like during the flight I'll ask our pilots if -- how the plane did
22 or whatever, but I never -- I didn't hear anything from 56's crew
23 of any issues.

24 Q. Okay. Do you know if they had any extra equipment on board
25 the airplane or had computers or anything before?

1 A. They would've had -- they had tow reel on the left wing.
2 They didn't have a target on there because they weren't using it
3 for that mission, it would've been the next day because they were
4 -- we went out there staggered. We went Monday, they went
5 Tuesday, we were going to come home Wednesday. Tuesday? Or --
6 yeah, we were coming home Wednesday and then they were coming home
7 Thursday. So they weren't doing their tow mission until the next
8 day, but they still -- they had the tow reel on the -- on the left
9 wing and they had IFF equipment on there. And probably, their --
10 well, yes, their controls for when they would use the tow reel,
11 yeah.

12 Q. Okay. And then stepping forward to -- you know, after, you
13 know, started seeing the -- or you were aware of the issues with
14 the other airplane, you mentioned that the last time you saw them
15 was when they went underneath the airplane. Two things with that,
16 about how far away were you from the airplane, I mean, how much
17 separation did you have? And then when you saw them that time, do
18 you recall if the airplane, if you could see smoke, flames, at
19 that time off the airplane?

20 A. I'm terrible at judging distance, especially in the air,
21 that's one thing that pilots can do but somebody might say yeah,
22 that's 2 miles away and say that looks -- my guess was they were a
23 thousand feet below us, so I could see them clearly. I did not
24 see any smoke or -- it just looked like their -- it almost looked
25 like maybe one of our maneuvers that we sometimes do where you're

1 leap-frogging or something, you know, they just -- yeah, they just
2 -- and yeah, for real, it's just like I didn't see any smoke, I
3 just saw them.

4 Q. And do you recall how -- what the weather was like when you
5 saw them the last time?

6 A. I can't really. I want to say that I didn't -- it doesn't
7 seem to me like it was cloudy or over -- I think there were
8 clouds, I don't really know where, but when we were with them and
9 when I saw them and stuff, I don't think that there was -- like
10 visibility wasn't a factor and I don't really know if there was
11 like clouds under us or over us or -- I don't know.

12 MR. BAKER: All right. Michael, do you have any questions?

13 MR. LEMAY: No, I don't, I don't have any more questions,
14 thanks.

15 MR. BAKER: Okay. Paul?

16 MR. RHO: No, I'm good.

17 MR. BAKER: Rickey?

18 BY MR. SMITH:

19 Q. On 56, since they weren't going to be using the tow reel,
20 would mission power have been on for the tow reel or only for the
21 -- the transponder?

22 A. No, mission power would not have been on. In fact, that
23 mission power would only be on if there were -- had a pod on the
24 wing, which they were going to have the next day, but for -- if
25 you're doing IFF or using our WASP computers, our GPS tracking, we

1 don't need mission power on, that's just 60 hertz power.

2 MR. SMITH: Okay.

3 MR. LEMAY: Where do you top off for the mission power, what
4 bus?

5 MR. SMITH: They come off of generator vessels.

6 MR. LEMAY: The generator vessels? Okay.

7 MR. KOOKEGY: Yeah, yeah.

8 MR. LEMAY: So the BC (ph.) main bus?

9 MR. SMITH: Do what?

10 MR. LEMAY: The main bus.

11 MR. KOOKEGY: Yeah.

12 MR. SMITH: Yeah. But they actually come off the generator
13 bus, so if the generator goes away, mission power goes away.

14 MR. LEMAY: Okay.

15 MR. SMITH: It's just like the (indiscernible) stuff, the
16 hydraulic stuff, the auto-load shed (ph.), so it's set up in an
17 auto-load shed fashion.

18 MR. LEMAY: Okay.

19 MR. KOOKEGY: Yeah, yeah.

20 MR. LEMAY: Which side do you get it, left, left or right?

21 MR. SMITH: Both.

22 MR. LEMAY: Both, okay.

23 MR. KOOKEGY: Yeah. And then --

24 MR. SMITH: There's a little taken from each one.

25 MR. LEMAY: Yeah. Okay.

1 MR. KOOKEGY: And for that like kind of mission that we were
2 doing, since it was only WASP, it was like, for us, that's as easy
3 as it gets because you don't have to turn this on, whatever, it's
4 just that we have a 60 hertz inverter in the back that also is
5 hooked into that, to run that power, but we don't have the main
6 inverters on.

7 MR. LEMAY: So is there a procedure before takeoff, like you
8 know what mission you're going to be doing, you just make sure
9 that those are off before you take off?

10 MR. KOOKEGY: Oh, yeah, yeah. Yeah, they -- yeah, we -- it's
11 -- like on that one, all's we were doing was running our --
12 there's just two laptops that we have on the plane and that's
13 basically just plugging in, but yeah, there would be no reason to
14 have the mission power on.

15 MR. BAKER: All right, thank you.

16 (Whereupon, the interview concluded.)
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CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the attached proceeding before the

NATIONAL TRANSPORTATION SAFETY BOARD

IN THE MATTER OF: FATAL GATES LEARJET CRASH
NEAR SAN CLEMENTE ISLAND,
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Interview of John Kookegy

ACCIDENT NO.: WPR23FA185

PLACE: Cartersville, Georgia

DATE: June 1, 2023

was held according to the record, and that this is the original,
complete, true and accurate transcript which has been transcribed
to the best of my skill and ability.


Karen D. Martini
Transcriber