

Paymaun Basti
Air Safety Investigator
Western Pacific Region

Date: April 16, 2024

Subject: WPR24FA123, Accident involving N40261

Contact: Guillermo Hernandez, fuel truck operator

In an interview, Mr. Hernandez stated the following:

- At about 0830 on the morning of the accident, the pilot flew the accident airplane from Williams, California to the airstrip at Alturas Ranches. The flight took about 45 minutes to an hour.
- When the pilot landed at Alturas Ranches, he picked up rice, but did not have the airplane refueled at that time. The pilot then departed from the airstrip and applied 8 loads of rice to the fields.
- Upon returning to the airstrip, the pilot requested that the fuel tanks be filled until they were $\frac{3}{4}$ full. Mr. Hernandez and another worker then fueled the airplane as requested.
- The pilot once again departed from the airstrip and applied 7 or 8 loads of rice to the fields before returning. The pilot was asked if he needed more fuel, but he declined for more to be added, indicating he wanted to apply one more load of rice to the field. The pilot subsequently departed the airstrip and did not return.

Date: April 17, 2024

Subject: WPR24FA123, Accident involving N40261

Contact: Gene Muir, Pilot/Mechanic

In an interview, Mr. Muir stated the following:

- The accident airplane, N40261, had been purchased by the operator relatively recently.
- The pilot had never flown N40261 before. The pilot normally flew airplanes equipped with different engines. The accident airplane had a Garrett TPE-331.
- N40261 burned about 80 gallons of fuel per hour on takeoff, and about 60-65 gallons of fuel per hour in other phases of flight.
- The airplane held about 115 gallons of fuel in each wing tank.
- On the morning of the accident, the pilot departed Williams, California, for the airstrip at Alturas Ranches. The airplane departed with full fuel tanks. The flight from Williams to Alturas Ranches takes between an hour and fifteen minutes and an hour and a half to complete.
- The pilot later texted that the fuel gauges were not moving. Mr. Muir responded that N40261's gauges were slower to respond than similar airplanes' gauges and pointed out that only 82 gallons per side was "gaugeable." He stated there was a placard on the airplane's instrument panel indicating this.

Date: April 18, 2024

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Contact: John Kingbaum, truck driver/loader

In an interview, Mr. Kingbaum stated the following:

- On the day of the accident, he was at the airstrip and loaded N40261 with rice using a hopper at the airstrip.
- At about 1230, he saw the pilot request fuel for the airplane refueled. That was the only time he saw the airplane being refueled that day.
- He saw the pilot in N40261 prior to the airplane's departure on the accident flight. The pilot donned his helmet and put on his harness prior to takeoff.

Date: April 18, 2024

Subject: WPR24FA123, Accident involving N40261

Contact: Jayson West, truck driver/loader

In an interview, Mr. West stated the following:

- The pilot landed N40261 at the airstrip at about 0900. The pilot subsequently had the airplane filled with rice but did not request fuel.
- At about 1230, the pilot returned to the airstrip and requested fuel and a load of rice. This was the only time he observed the airplane receiving fuel.
- Mr. West saw the pilot get in and out of the airplane during its stop for fuel and rice. He perceived that the pilot was moving more slowly when he got in and out of the cockpit than was typical.
- At about 1500, when the pilot had failed to return after departing for the last flight of the day, Mr. West became concerned. He called his wife, who was in a nearby residence, and asked if she could hear the airplane nearby. When she couldn't hear the airplane, Mr. West used binoculars to look for the airplane, and saw it inverted in one of the rice paddies.
- By the time Mr. West was able to make it to the crashed airplane, first responders had arrived.

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Contact: Brad Criner, ranch hand

In an interview, Mr. Criner stated the following:

- The pilot began work at about 0930-1000 on the morning of the accident.
- At about 1400, when the airplane had returned to the airstrip for more rice, the pilot stated he "wasn't feeling great" and was going to conclude his workday after applying one more load of rice.
- Mr. Criner said this was unlike the pilot's usual performance, noting he usually worked all day and hadn't asked to depart work early previously.

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Contact: David Rhineheart, resident

In an interview, Mr. Rhineheart stated the following:

- He was working in a nearby shop when he heard the airplane crash. He looked out the doors of the shop and saw the airplane inverted in the rice paddy.
- It took him about 3 minutes to reach the accident site. He tried to open the airplane's door, but it was jammed. He was digging out the mud around the doorframe when a co-worker arrived with a shovel. They used the shovel to break the hinges off the door and open it.
- The pilot was unresponsive, and his safety harness was unbuckled. Mr. Rhineheart stated neither he nor his co-worker had unbuckled the safety harness; it was unbuckled when they arrived.