

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

NATIONAL TRANSPORTATION SAFETY BOARD

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Investigation of:

FATAL AIRCRAFT ACCIDENT NEAR
SWANSON AIRPORT IN EATONVILLE,
WASHINGTON JULY 6, 2024

Accident No.: WPR24FA226

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Interview of:

Witness

Eatonville, Washington

Sunday,
July 7, 2024

APPEARANCES:

KATHRYN WHITAKER, Investigator
National Transportation Safety Board

STEPHEN STEIN, Investigator
National Transportation Safety Board

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Interview of [REDACTED]:

By Ms. Whitaker

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I N T E R V I E W

BY MS. WHITAKER:

Q. So when you were observing this airplane, as it continued through while you saw it, did you -- did it have a normal shape? Did the wings look like they were still on it? Did it --

A. Yes, it --

Q. Did anything --

A. Everything was still attached.

Q. And it wasn't -- nothing flew off of it?

A. No.

Q. You didn't see any smoke or anything like that?

A. No, nothing flew off the airplane until, you know, obviously when it went nose down.

Q. Yeah.

A. And we heard the impact. We heard it breaking through the trees.

Q. Interesting. Okay.

A. We heard the impact, and then like I said, while we were up there, we -- a couple more people came up searching for his son that sometime flies with him. And the -- we thought it was only one person. Later, we determined that -- another person went around the other side, and there was another person in there with him.

Q. Okay.

A. But, then the 911 or the first responders were -- I was

1 actually yelling for them. So they were able to find us, and they
2 got back there, and then that's when they kind of -- they knew
3 there was two people both deceased.

4 Q. Yeah.

5 A. And they told us basically -- we were done. So.

6 Q. And it was still light out, pretty light out, right?

7 A. No, it was getting dark.

8 Q. It was getting dark.

9 A. It was, it was -- I would say by the time we probably found
10 the plane it was probably 9:45, 10 o'clock --

11 Q. Oh, okay.

12 A. -- you know what I mean?

13 Q. Yeah.

14 A. It was because we were using our cell phones lights to go
15 through the woods --

16 Q. Oh, wow.

17 A. -- and through the trails and trying to find it. So we just
18 knew -- basically when we went -- I forgot one part. When we went
19 down to the trail, that there was another -- people that were
20 coming off the trail that were very concerned, and they said that
21 it was -- that he almost hit them but it's on the far side of the
22 river.

23 Q. Interesting.

24 A. And that's what he told us, and then that's where we left.

25 Q. Huh.

1 A. That's where we started running down to try to find it.

2 Q. Wow. Okay.

3 MS. WHITAKER: Do we have any other questions?

4 MR. STEIN: Could you just spell your first and last name for
5 the recording?

6 MR. [REDACTED]: [REDACTED]

7 MS. WHITAKER: Awesome. All right.

8 (Whereupon, the interview was concluded.)

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CERTIFICATE

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[REDACTED]
Transcriber

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Accident No.: WPR24FA226

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Interview of:

Witness

Eatonville, Washington

Monday,
July 8, 2024

APPEARANCES:

KATHRYN WHITAKER, Investigator
National Transportation Safety Board

STEPHEN STEIN, Investigator
National Transportation Safety Board

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I N T E R V I E W

(3:12 p.m.)

MS. WHITAKER: -- is first of all, may I have your first and last name spelled.

MR. [REDACTED]: [REDACTED]

MS. WHITAKER: And my name is Kathryn Whitaker spelled K-a-t-h-r-y-n, W-h-i-t-a-k-e-r, and I'm with the NTSB.

MR. STEIN: Stephen Stein, S-t-e-p-h-e-n, last name, S-t-e-i-n, Stein.

MS. WHITAKER: And so what we're going to ask you about today is an airplane accident that took place last night, and again, we are not going to putting this video out to the public. However, we will be using the audio to do a transcript, and the transcript itself will be presented in the public docket. But, we'll redact anything if you give any personally identifying, like sensitive information, that will be redacted.

And one last time, you are -- you do consent to be recorded, correct?

MR. [REDACTED] Yes.

MS. WHITAKER: Okay. Very good.

INTERVIEW OF [REDACTED]

BY MS. WHITAKER:

Q. All right. So why don't you just tell me the story of what you saw last night.

A. All right. So, yeah. I was outside here. The runway is

1 just right over here. I heard them do the run up and then take
2 off, and I was talking to my wife, and I didn't actually see it
3 crash, but I heard the engine cut out. And then less than like 5
4 or 10 seconds later, I heard the crash. And then hopped in my car
5 and went to go look, and maybe like a half an hour after the
6 crash, I was the first person on scene like I said.

7 Q. I see. Okay. When you heard the airplane doing its engine
8 run up, could you describe that to me?

9 A. So I have my A&P. So I am familiar with airplanes.

10 Q. Oh, very cool.

11 A. Everything sounded okay on takeoff --

12 Q. Okay.

13 A. -- until the engine cut out.

14 Q. Interesting. At what point did the engine cut out?

15 A. Less than, I don't know, 30 seconds after they cleared here
16 which the end of the runway --

17 Q. Yeah.

18 A. -- for reference, is just right on the other side of these
19 trees here.

20 Q. Yeah, I did see that. You're very close to that.

21 BY MR. STEIN:

22 Q. Can you show us with the airplane, how you saw it take off?
23 Did it take off -- a video here.

24 A. Yeah, just -- I don't know. Like a typical takeoff. It was
25 I would say lower than what is typical, but it's not unusual for

1 people to come through here low. Normally they're way above the
2 trees but --

3 Q. Is it -- what's the flight path for them?

4 A. Okay. Yeah, so just on the other side of these trees, I mean
5 it's not uncommon for them to come over our house either but,
6 yeah. Just like -- I don't know, not even 100 yards or like just
7 on the other side of those houses there.

8 Q. I was going to say, you saw --

9 A. Um-hum.

10 Q. -- or so you used the airplane.

11 A. Yeah, I mean it took off, not like at an especially steep
12 angle or anything, but right through here.

13 Q. So normal angle attack.

14 A. Yeah.

15 Q. Okay. And you said the engine sounded what? Smooth and
16 continuous. My words, not yours.

17 A. Yeah, I heard nothing unusual about the engine sounds.

18 Q. Okay. Great. And then you said it cut out when? So it flew
19 here --

20 A. Um-hum.

21 Q. -- and then disappeared from view?

22 A. Yeah, it was out of view. I wasn't really watching it --

23 Q. Got it.

24 A. -- especially but --

25 Q. So you said about 15 seconds after you saw it here is when

1 you heard the engine cut out?

2 A. 15 to 30 seconds later, yeah.

3 Q. 15 to 30 seconds later. Okay. Do you have a way to -- do
4 you have like a timestamp or way to like indicate what time you
5 were as a timestamp?

6 A. I called 911. So that should tell me.

7 Q. That's a good --

8 MS. WHITAKER: Yeah, that's actually really helpful to us.

9 MR. [REDACTED] Okay. But apparently I didn't because my phone
10 does remember that. That's weird. I must have -- well, I
11 guess --

12 MS. WHITAKER: If you can't find it, that's fine.

13 MR. [REDACTED] Yeah, it's weird that --

14 MR. STEIN: It is.

15 MR. [REDACTED] I (indiscernible) yesterday and it's a --

16 BY MR. STEIN:

17 Q. I didn't know if you remembered. If you were to estimate.

18 A. Like 9:15 maybe.

19 Q. 9:15, okay. And then could you describe you said the engine
20 cut out. Describe that.

21 A. Like it --

22 Q. Did that sound just cease completely?

23 A. The sound just ceased completely, and like people, you know,
24 they -- there's a flight school, you know, people practice here a
25 lot. So like it's common for, you know, them to go all the way to

1 idle, to practice like push stalls and whatnot.

2 Q. Yeah.

3 A. And like I kind of tone that out completely, but it did not
4 sound like that to me. It sounded like the engine was just
5 completely --

6 Q. Like somebody pulled the throttle all the way to idle or
7 less.

8 A. Beyond idle.

9 Q. Beyond idle. Okay. Like mixture cutoff --

10 A. Um-hum.

11 Q. -- situation? Gotcha.

12 MS. WHITAKER: Interesting.

13 BY MS. WHITAKER:

14 Q. Do you have any sort of security cameras on your property?

15 A. No, I don't.

16 Q. Okay. Do you know of any of your neighbors that do? If not,
17 that's fine.

18 A. I think this neighbor might.

19 Q. Okay.

20 A. I don't know if it's a real one but he has one up by his
21 front door.

22 Q. Okay.

23 A. Yeah, it's weird my phone doesn't show 911.

24 Q. We could probably pull it up from the sheriff's department.
25 Maybe they will give that to us.

1 MR. STEIN: Yeah, maybe they will give that to us.

2 BY MS. WHITAKER:

3 Q. Yeah. So I wouldn't sweat that too much. Is there anything
4 else you think I should know or any input that you think would be
5 valuable?

6 A. You know, I did my job.

7 Q. Okay.

8 BY MR. STEIN:

9 Q. Did you know him?

10 A. I did know, John.

11 Q. Other than doing your job, how long have you known him?

12 A. Maybe 10 or 12 years.

13 Q. Oh, wow.

14 A. Not super well but if I saw him around town (indiscernible).

15 Q. Have you ever worked on his aircraft?

16 A. I've been in his hanger but I didn't work on anything.

17 MS. WHITAKER: Okay. I don't have anything else. Do you
18 know?

19 MR. STEIN: No.

20 MS. WHITAKER: Okay. I'm going to stop the recording.

21 (Whereupon, the interview was concluded.)
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SWANSON AIRPORT IN EATONVILLE,

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Interview of: WITNESS

Eatonville, Washington

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APPEARANCES:

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I N T E R V I E W

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2 MS. WHITAKER: The audio basically we use so that we don't
3 misunderstand anything that's being said to us, you know.

4 WITNESS: Okay.

5 MS. WHITAKER: We take notes. It's not always perfect
6 though. So it's better to have just a recording in case we miss
7 anything.

8 WITNESS: Okay.

9 MS. WHITAKER: And then for video, the reason we would like
10 to do this today is because we have a mock up of an airplane,
11 although not the one that was involved in this.

12 INTERVIEW OF WITNESS

13 BY MS. WHITAKER:

14 Q. But we would like you to show us what you saw.

15 A. All right.

16 Q. Because a lot of times it's easier for folks to just, you
17 know, show it.

18 A. Yeah.

19 Q. So the day that, yesterday, when you were here, about where
20 were you?

21 A. Right there by the trees.

22 Q. Okay.

23 A. Right by that red one.

24 Q. Okay. And why don't you take and show me what you saw, from
25 start to finish.

1 A. Yeah. I have to use my language and terms.

2 MR. STEIN: That's okay.

3 WITNESS: So we were just hanging out, and we -- I saw -- I
4 knew the airplane or saw a plane take off, and it came up, and
5 then it was -- didn't look right. It was kind of struggling a
6 little bit. And then it started banking left, and it was still --
7 it wasn't -- the speed didn't seem right. It didn't seem
8 anything. It started banking, pulled a barrel roll and then like
9 right after the barrel roll, it like stopped, like the motor
10 stopped at some point in there and then it just nose dived right
11 down into the trees. So -- and then it was right over there. I
12 mean everything just happened -- it was just like -- we were just
13 -- you know, you always see a plane, you always watch as the plane
14 takes off -- take off because we live around here.

15 MS. WHITAKER: Yeah.

16 WITNESS: So you're always curious. But it just -- as soon
17 as he was coming up, it just -- it didn't seem right. It seemed
18 like it was something -- he was having some sort of malfunction,
19 and I don't remember if it was when he was like at this point
20 where he's starting to turn, where the engine cut or something.
21 There was just no noise after a little bit, and then I think
22 that's when he tried to do a barrel roll or something to get
23 something out of it, and then it just -- like I said, just
24 straight down in the trees. There was no -- not enough altitude.
25 There was not enough speed. There was not enough of a lot of

1 things that happened there.

2 BY MS. WHITAKER:

3 Q. Okay. So if you could show me about how high the airplane
4 was and where it was in relation to the trees that are in front of
5 us and this ridge that's behind us. What can you tell me?

6 A. I would say it was only like probably 10, 15 feet above the
7 trees. It wasn't, it wasn't that high.

8 Q. Okay. It really wasn't that high at all.

9 MR. STEIN: Above the ridgeline trees or --

10 WITNESS: Or, no. Probably about these ones right in front
11 of us. It was probably -- so ridgeline, it probably would have
12 been about same height as ridgeline trees. Like it just didn't
13 work out too well. So it was right there. So it didn't, it
14 didn't happen. He didn't have enough elevation, not enough --
15 something was definitely like wrong.

16 BY MS. WHITAKER:

17 Q. And so when you said you didn't think the engine was running,
18 was it just -- did you hear any noises? Were there pops or
19 anything like that that preceded?

20 A. I didn't hear a pop, but you did hear it coming in. You did
21 hear the engine running while he was taking off, while he was
22 going up, all through, and then as soon as he started banking out,
23 it like -- it cut.

24 Q. Huh.

25 A. And there was no noise. So that's why I don't know if the

1 barrel roll was trying to do something --

2 Q. Yeah.

3 A. -- mechanically. I have no clue about planes, but it didn't
4 seem like it was a natural maneuver right away, you know what I
5 mean.

6 Q. Okay.

7 BY MR. STEIN:

8 Q. With his -- so the nose of the airplane --

9 A. Uh-huh.

10 Q. -- you showed it really high. Was he at a really nose high
11 attitude like this?

12 A. Yeah, when he was taking off and then when he, when he
13 started banking around, it flattened out and then he barrel --
14 like barrel rolled and as soon as it barrel rolled, it just went
15 like he -- it straightened back out and he just went straight
16 down. So.

17 MS. WHITAKER: Okay.

18 BY MR. STEIN:

19 Q. About what time? Do you remember?

20 A. It was somewhere around 9 o'clock.

21 Q. 9 o'clock.

22 A. Between 9 and 10 o'clock, somewhere around there. So. But
23 -- and then we were obviously some of the first people on the
24 scene, too. So as soon as, as soon as we saw this happen, me and
25 Jessie (ph.) jumped in the truck and I kind of know the lay of the

1 land. So we took off down the street, and as soon as I -- there's
2 a trailhead over there. As soon as we pulled into the trailhead,
3 we saw an Eatonville cop, went straight over to him, and told him
4 that a plane just wrecked.

5 MS. WHITAKER: Yeah.

6 WITNESS: Then proceeded to go down at that time to the gate.
7 At that time, there was another vehicle, an Audi flew by us. He
8 stopped. He jumped out, and he ran down the trailhead, never sure
9 where he went or if it was the same person that we met up with
10 down on the trail. We got -- we started running down. We got
11 across the bridge. We started cutting down the trail just after
12 the bridge, because that's where we kind of thought it was. We
13 met up with another guy somewhere around that trail or right
14 before the trail, and while we were back in there, you could smell
15 something hot. He's like there's another trail, 100 yards down.
16 He goes, go back out, head up -- and there's a meadow there. Head
17 up to the meadow. I'll cut up through. We'll meet back up in the
18 meadow. So that's what we did. We all met back up in the meadow.
19 We kind of looked around a little bit, and that was a high access
20 point on a rock where --

21 MS. WHITAKER: Yeah.

22 WITNESS: -- it really didn't matter because there's too
23 woodlandy (ph.), I guess I should say. But at that point, all
24 three of us talked, and we decided, you know, we did smell
25 something very hot at the first trail we were down.

1 MS. WHITAKER: Interesting.

2 WITNESS: So that's when we took off back down that trail
3 again. I was in the lead. It was -- Jessie was behind me, and
4 then this other gentleman. I don't remember his name. And I was
5 -- it was starting to get -- it was pretty dark. We were using
6 our cell phone flashlights. He cut back up. He was coming up on
7 the trail above us through the woods, he -- we started to turn up,
8 and as soon as we started to turn it, he said I found something.
9 And we both came up. We all three came up there, and it was the
10 plane, and that's when I proceeded to call 911.

11 MS. WHITAKER: Okay.

12 WITNESS: So -- and then, you know, I stood back a little bit
13 while I was talking to 911. The other gentleman went up to the
14 plane and determined that there was -- he thought there was only
15 one passenger at first --

16 MS. WHITAKER: Yeah.

17 WITNESS: -- determined he was deceased.

18 MS. WHITAKER: Yeah.

19 WITNESS: Then another guy came up, like two more people came
20 up, once they found it and everything, and we were still on the
21 phone. We were looking around. We kind of figured out who it was
22 because the first gentleman we were with knew --

23 (Whereupon, the interview was concluded.)
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