

FACTUAL INCIDENT REPORT

Aircraft Accident at Furnace Creek Airport (L06)

Submitted by: [REDACTED]

Date: 20 June 2026

Aircraft: Cessna 172S Skyhawk SP (N96FA)

Location: Furnace Creek Airport (L06), Runway 33

Date of occurrence: Wednesday, 17 June 2026

1. Personal Background

My name is [REDACTED] and I am a resident of Switzerland.

I have been a licensed Private Pilot (PPL-A) for ten years and have accumulated around 200 total flight hours.

I obtained my pilot license in Austria, where I completed my practical examination on a Cessna 172 and accumulated approximately 70 hours on this aircraft type. During recent years, I have mainly flown Robin DR400 and Cessna 182 aircraft. Also Katana's.

Prior to this trip, my last flight in a Cessna 172 had been approximately seven years ago (2019)

I consider myself a safety-conscious pilot. Every spring, I voluntarily complete additional training flights in Austria in preparation for the summer flying season in order to maintain and improve my flying proficiency.

Throughout my entire flying career, I have completed well over 1,000 successful landings without any previous accidents

2. Initial Planning and Full Transparency Regarding Furnace Creek

Several weeks before the trip, my family and I planned to rent an aircraft in California to visit Death Valley.

From the very beginning, I openly communicated my intention to fly to Furnace Creek Airport (L06).

I informed Flying Academy staff members, including [REDACTED] and [REDACTED], during multiple conversations over several weeks while converting my Austrian pilot license into an FAA certificate and setting up the contracts. (Attachement 1 and Attachement 2)

Because we expected the FAA license conversion process to take approximately 45 days, [REDACTED] and I had discussed a backup plan in which another pilot would fly us to Death Valley. This clearly shows that we had multiple conversations about Death Valley and Furnace Creek and that my plans were openly communicated at all times. (Attachement 3)

On Monday, 15 June 2026, I completed the FAA validation process with Designated Pilot Examiner [REDACTED] and received my temporary FAA certificate.

During this process, I also informed [REDACTED] about my plan to fly to Furnace Creek Airport. The only concern that was discussed was the high temperature at Furnace Creek. I informed him that I would additionally review all performance calculations with my instructor. (Attachement 4)

Moreover, i spoke with my flight instructor about my plans and Furnace Creek as you will read below.

At no point was I told by the flying academy employees that Furnace Creek Airport was prohibited, inappropriate, or unsafe for my planned operation.

3. Local Checkout and Instructor Briefing

On Tuesday, 16 June 2026, I completed my local checkout flight with instructor [REDACTED]

At the very beginning of our meeting, I specifically informed him of my intention to fly to Furnace Creek.

I directly asked him whether landing there was feasible.

He considered the operation possible but emphasized the importance of correctly calculating density altitude and weight and balance.

We discussed density altitude multiple times throughout the day.

We also reviewed several route options for my plans on Wednesday.

I specifically asked whether Furnace Creek Airport was prohibited by Flying Academy, because I had read rental agreement clauses restricting some airports above certain elevations.

[REDACTED] explicitly confirmed that Furnace Creek Airport could be used and was not prohibited by the flight school.

We additionally discussed the airport big bear city, which I considered for a fuel stop during my return flight from Las Vegas. [REDACTED] specifically informed me that this alternative airport was prohibited by the flight school, further reinforcing my understanding that Furnace Creek itself was permitted.

This level of transparency was maintained at every stage as you read before.

I would like to emphasize that of course I do not hold [REDACTED] responsible for the accident. He performed his duties professionally and thoroughly. I enjoyed the day with him.

However, it is important to note that he was fully aware of my plans and did not advise against them.

We had a training from around 9am to 4pm, we fly to several airports.

4. Research and Preparation

I conducted extensive research before the flight.

I reviewed official airport information for Furnace Creek Airport.

I also researched pilot experiences and online aviation forums, many of which described the runway as rough but operational.

Multiple pilots reported successful operations at Furnace Creek.

I additionally noticed that the official airport information warned about rough runway conditions and wheel fairings potentially being damaged.

The aircraft I rented did not have wheel fairings installed.

At every stage, all available information indicated that Furnace Creek was an operational airport that could be safely used if proper performance calculations and precautions were taken.

Coming from Switzerland and Austria, I would personally consider the runway surface quality unusually poor compared to European standards, but I relied on the fact that the airport remains officially open and operational.

5. Training Flight

The local checkout was completed successfully.

The only difficulty I encountered was radio communication due to fast-spoken English instructions, despite holding a valid ICAO English Level 4 qualification.

All other flight operations were performed without issues.

I completed all landings myself.

██████ also observed my normal landing technique.

My standard landing procedure consists of:

- 10° flaps in downwind
- 20° flaps in base
- Full flaps on final

This is the procedure I have been taught and have consistently used for approximately ten years.

I normally operate from a relatively short home runway (LOIH, 630 Meters) in Austria and therefore regularly use full flaps.

After the checkout, ██████ confirmed that I had successfully completed the local checkout and was safe to operate the aircraft independently. (Attachement 5)

6. Flight Preparation on 17 June 2026

Mostly on Wednesday morning, I carefully prepared the flight.

I used:

- The official Cessna 172S Pilot Operating Handbook
- SkyDemon for weight and balance calculations
- SkyDemon for fuel planning

The attachement 6 include:

- Flight route
- Weight and balance calculations
- Fuel planning
- Radio / Notam

The aircraft was fully fueled before departure in Van Nuys.

I additionally planned to physically verify fuel levels again at Furnace Creek for the next Flight to Vegas North.

Weather forecasts had been monitored throughout the entire week.

The forecast consistently indicated, also for Wednesday which was the day we flew:

- Approximately 30°C in the morning

- Approximately 40°C around noon (12/1)
- Up to 46°C during the afternoon peak

For this reason, we intentionally planned to arrive early and depart Furnace Creek before noon. The rental company can confirm that we intended to give the car back before 12 am.

The rental car was pre-positioned directly at the airport to minimize time spent in high temperatures and being able to leave death valley soon. Our route in death valley was not supposed to be long, see attachment 7a and 7b. For us was important, to leave around noon to not have more than around 40 degrees.

I deliberately based all performance calculations on 40°C, even though temperatures upon arrival were expected to be lower.

7. Departure from Van Nuys

I completed all checklist items.

The flap system was tested and functioning properly before departure.

The same was true during the instructor checkout the previous day.

Weather in Los Angeles initially delayed our departure due to low clouds.

After waiting at the holdshort for approximately 10 to 15 minutes, I received departure clearance.

I requested slower radio instructions from ATC in order to ensure full understanding.

The remainder of the flight was uneventful.

I did not request flight following because this had previously been discussed with my instructor and was not considered mandatory for the intended route. He told me to be aware of the restricted area's, wich i did not fly in. We (paul and i) discussed telling ATC that I was flying VFR to Mojave so that I could depart northbound. We also discussed that I would then terminate radio communication once I had left the van nuys area.

Cruise conditions were very stable and smooth

8. Approach and Landing at Furnace Creek

Upon arrival at Furnace Creek Airport (L06), I intentionally overflew the airport to assess wind conditions and observe the windsock. (See Attachment 6b)

This was a deliberate safety measure.

At that moment, I could not identify a clear wind direction and the windsock appeared calm.

Based on these observations, I elected to land on Runway 33.

I entered the traffic pattern approximately 1,000 feet above ground level according to my normal procedures.

My flap configuration was:

- 10° in downwind
- 20° in base
- Full flaps on final

My recollection is that my airspeed over the threshold was approximately 65 knots.

I estimate that touchdown occurred approximately 400 meters (1312 feet) after the threshold, which still corresponded with my performance calculations and expectations including the safety margin. Of course it is impossible for me to locate where exactly the touchdown has been.

Immediately after touchdown, I applied maximum braking.

The aircraft initially decelerated as expected.

This initial deceleration reinforced my assessment that the available runway length would be sufficient.

Only several seconds later did I begin to realize that stopping performance was deteriorating.

Based on my observations, I believe stronger tailwind conditions may have developed during the landing roll.

Additionally, the rough and uneven runway surface appeared to reduce braking effectiveness.

At that moment, I had to rapidly assess whether a go-around remained a safe option.

Having already significantly reduced speed, with two passengers on board, I assessed that initiating a go-around at that stage could have created a substantially greater risk.

Had anything appeared abnormal during the approach itself, I would have immediately executed a go-around.

However, this was not the case. The approach appeared stable and within normal parameters.

I therefore continued maximum braking.

The aircraft subsequently entered the gravel beyond the runway, the nose wheel dug into the ground, and the aircraft slowly overturned. It was like in slowmotion.

Fortunately, the very low speed likely explains to me why none of the occupants were injured.

9. Wind Conditions as a Significant Contributing Factor

Following the accident, a local police officer (woman) familiar with Death Valley conditions and departing/arriving a lot on this runway (as she told me), explained, that wind conditions in the area can change rapidly and that temporary strong gusts can appear.

In retrospect, rapidly changing wind conditions appear to have been a significant contributing factor.

This possibility exists despite my intentional overflight of the airport and windsock assessment.

10. Performance Planning

I manually performed landing calculations using Figure 5-11 (Page 135) of the official Cessna 172S Pilot Operating Handbook. As my skydemon programme does not offer a runway-performance calculation, i made it by myself digitaly with my macbook in the app «Notizen».

Conservative assumptions were intentionally used.

Parameters:

Aircraft: Cessna 172S Skyhawk SP

Maximum gross weight: 2,550 lbs

Temperature used for calculations: 40°C

Pressure altitude used: MSL

Full flap landing configuration intended

Runway length: 934 m (3,064 ft)

POH baseline:

- Ground roll: 625 ft
- Total distance over 50 ft obstacle: 1,415 ft

Additional safety adjustments:

The POH does not provide a specific landing-distance correction for a runway surface affected by salt heave, cracks, bumps, ruts, and crumbling asphalt. However, the published condition of Furnace Creek Airport describes the runway as being in poor/failed asphalt condition, with up to 4-inch salt heave around runway cracks, and the National Park Service advises pilots to consider treating it like a gravel/unpaved surface. Therefore, while the POH 45% dry-grass correction cannot be applied as an exact manufacturer-approved correction for this specific surface, for me it provided a reasonable conservative reference point to account for degraded runway-surface effects beyond a paved, level, dry runway.

1. Rough runway adjustment (+45% ground roll):

$$625 \times 1.45 = 906 \text{ ft}$$

Adjusted total: 1,696 ft

2. Conservative 10-knot tailwind assumption (+50% per POH guidance):

$$1,696 \times 1.50 = 2,544 \text{ ft}$$

Available runway:

3,064 ft

Remaining safety margin:

Approximately 500 ft (approximately 15%)

These calculations significantly influenced my decision-making process because they indicated that the operation could be safely completed.

In retrospect, an even larger safety margin for the rough runway conditions could have been considered. However, at the time of the flight, I already applied a substantial additional safety factor of 45% specifically because of the known poor runway condition. One of the challenges was that effective braking performance depends on maintaining sufficient tire contact with the ground. Due to the rough and uneven runway surface, this contact was not always consistent, which likely reduced the effectiveness of the braking action.

11. Post-Accident Findings and Subsequent Meeting With Flying Academy

After the Accident the police appeared quickly as of a emergency call automatically from my iphone. We then drove to las vegas, rented a car and drove the same day back to los angeles. I had originally intended to return to Flying Academy on Thursday to return the headsets and discuss the insurance process following the accident. However, I was suffering from significant headaches and therefore postponed my visit until Friday.

On Friday, I returned to the flight school.

█ conducted the meeting with me, while three additional members of the flight school joined remotely via a laptop and listened to the discussion.

At the beginning of the meeting, █ provided several forms that, according to him, were required for the insurance company. We completed these forms together and I signed them.

During this conversation, I asked about the insurance situation.

He explained that they first needed to determine whether the aircraft would be declared a total loss and that the aircraft would likely be recovered on Monday.

He also explained that the aircraft had an estimated value of approximately USD 320,000 but was only insured for USD 200,000. According to him, a solution would have to be found between the flight school and myself regarding the difference.

I immediately pointed out that, according to my rental agreement, all aircraft were insured up to USD 1,000,000 and questioned why an aircraft with an estimated value of USD 320,000 would only be insured for USD 200,000. A full coverage (as of 1 Million) is also what █ and i spoke about in our calls. By no time i was explained that i would pay a difference.

He replied that aircraft values fluctuate over time.

When I responded that an aircraft's value could not reasonably fluctuate by approximately 35%, he stated that this matter would have to be discussed with management rather than with him.

Afterwards, █ presented another document for me to complete and sign on behalf of the flight school. (Attachement 8)

At first glance, the document appeared almost identical to the insurance forms we had already completed.

However, my brother carefully reviewed the document and discovered an additional clause at the end stating that I would assume responsibility for all damages not covered by the insurance policy.

This clause was not part of our original rental agreement, and at no point during the meeting was I specifically informed that such an additional liability provision had been included.

This significantly reduced our trust in the process, as it appeared that I was being asked to accept obligations that had never previously been agreed upon.

We therefore declined to proceed and requested to speak directly with the manager. I know that this information is not in direct context with the accident, but i want to have it written down in my statement.

█ then called the manager and placed the conversation on speakerphone.

During this conversation, the manager stated that I should never have flown to Furnace Creek in the first place. This was surprising to me, considering that Furnace Creek Airport is not listed as a prohibited airport in the rental agreement and that I had openly discussed my plans with multiple members of Flying Academy, including my instructor, well before the flight.

He further accused me of putting my passengers at risk and stated that Europeans generally do not understand density altitude operations.

He also stated that I would either have to resolve the matter with the insurance lawyers or find a solution directly with the flight school. I would like to explicitly document that I personally perceived this statement as a threat.

As the manager repeatedly interrupted me and did not allow me to fully explain my position, I decided to stop engaging in the discussion.

At that point, another individual joined the conversation. I was informed that this person was the safety manager of the flight school.

He initially asked me several questions regarding the flight, which I answered.

He then accused me of having used an incorrect flap configuration during the approach and landing.

This statement immediately caught my attention and caused significant confusion because I was convinced that I had flown the approach using full flaps.

After leaving the flight school, I reviewed the photographs that had been taken of the aircraft after the accident.

To my surprise, I noticed that the flaps appeared to be in the UP position.

This was completely inconsistent with my recollection of the approach and landing.

I am convinced that I selected full flaps for three reasons.

First, my entire flight preparation and landing performance calculations had been based on a full flap landing.

Second, I have been landing with full flaps for approximately ten years and had done exactly the same during my training flight with instructor [REDACTED] the day before.

Third, I have developed the habit of verbally announcing every flap selection during every landing approach. I routinely say out loud: "Flaps 10 degrees", "Flaps 20 degrees", and "Flaps full". This is the procedure I was taught and have consistently followed throughout my flying career.

Because of this discrepancy, I contacted one of the police officers who had attended the accident scene on Wednesday and asked him to take a photograph of the cockpit.

I only received these photographs on Saturday evening, which is also the reason why I was unable to finalize and submit this statement earlier.

The photographs provided by the police officer also showed the flaps in the UP position. (Attachement 9)

Because I could not reconcile this discrepancy, I reviewed all of our photographs and also asked my wife to check hers. Unfortunately, we do not have a photograph of the windsock that I intentionally overflew before entering the traffic pattern. However, my wife provided me with a photograph that was taken shortly before the accident. This photograph appears to show the aircraft configured with full flaps, which is consistent with my recollection that I conducted the landing with full flaps selected.

At this stage, I cannot explain this discrepancy. Unfortunately, I did not take my own cockpit-photographs immediately after the accident.

I can therefore only state that there is a significant inconsistency between my recollection, my normal operating procedures, the available photographs, and the flap position shown in later images.

At this time, I cannot exclude the possibility of a technical issue or another explanation that is currently unknown. I believe it may be worthwhile to investigate the flap system and any potential technical factors that could explain the discrepancy between my recollection, the available photographs, and the flap position observed after the accident.

if for any reason the flaps were in fact not fully deployed during the landing roll despite having been selected so, the POH indicates that approximately 35% additional landing distance should be considered. Applying this

adjustment to my calculated landing distance of 2,544 feet results in a required landing distance of approximately 3'434 feet, which exceeds the available runway length by approximately 400 feet. This could, in combination with the changing wind conditions and the rough runway surface, provide a plausible explanation to me as to why the aircraft did not come to a stop before reaching the end of the runway.

13. Final Statement

I would like to emphasize that I acted at all times in good faith and according to my best knowledge and abilities.

Safety has always been my highest priority.

I performed extensive planning, consulted multiple people, completed all required training, openly communicated my plans and carried out conservative performance calculations.

At no point did I intentionally disregard safety procedures or expose anybody to unnecessary risk.

I deeply regret this accident and sincerely apologize to everyone affected by this event.



21 June 2026