



AVIATION



HIGHWAY



MARINE



RAILROAD



PIPELINE

Aviation Investigation Final Report

Location:	Skwentna, Alaska	Accident Number:	ANC23FA061
Date & Time:	August 9, 2023, 12:15 Local	Registration:	N4481Z
Aircraft:	Piper PA-18-150	Aircraft Damage:	Destroyed
Defining Event:	Unknown or undetermined	Injuries:	2 Fatal
Flight Conducted Under:	Part 135: Air taxi & commuter - Non-scheduled		

Analysis

The pilot was conducting a commercial on-demand charter flight to shuttle two individuals in support of a remote hunting excursion. The accident flight passenger and a friend chartered with the pilot's company to transport them and their hunting gear to a base camp. Three days before the accident, the pilot and the two hunters departed from the company's base airport and conducted a scouting trip in the pilot's Cessna 206 airplane to check out the area for a possible hunting location and a suitable landing area for the pilot's PA-18 airplane.

On the morning of the accident, about 0830, the pilot and the two hunters departed the company's base airport in the Cessna 206 airplane, and they landed at a remote airstrip in an area about 50 miles southeast of the planned base camp. The hunters and hunting gear were offloaded and the pilot returned to the company base in the Cessna 206 to pick up his PA-18 airplane. The pilot returned to the remote airstrip in the PA-18 and loaded one hunter and his gear for the flight to the hunting location. The pilot informed the other hunter he was expected to return in about 2 hours to pick him up and transport him to the planned hunting location.

The airplane departed the remote airstrip about 1150, and no further communications were received from the pilot or passenger. About 1600, after the airplane did not return, the hunter contacted family members using a satellite messaging device to see if they were aware of the overdue airplane's status. Over the next several hours, family members and friends attempted to communicate with the pilot and passenger's satellite messaging devices, but those attempts were unsuccessful.

Search and rescue operations began that evening, but initial search flights were suspended due to poor weather. The following day, the airplane wreckage was located at the bottom of an estimated 500 to 600 ft deep narrow ravine. Due to the unique challenges posed by the accident location, neither the occupants nor the wreckage were recovered from the accident site.

Weather information near the accident site was limited due to a lack of weather reporting facilities in the remote accident location. Weather advisories active for the area that included the accident site included mountains occasionally obscured by clouds/precipitation with deteriorating conditions. Based upon available weather data and the impact evidence, it is likely that the pilot entered an area of reduced visibility and was unable to maneuver the airplane to avoid the terrain before the airplane impacted the ravine.

Although the known circumstances of the accident are consistent with a controlled flight into terrain event, the factual information available was limited because the wreckage was not recovered and no autopsy or toxicology of the pilot could be performed; therefore, whether other circumstances may have contributed to the accident could not be determined.

Probable Cause and Findings

The National Transportation Safety Board determines the probable cause(s) of this accident to be:

An impact with terrain for reasons that could not be determined because the airplane was not recovered due to the inaccessible nature of the accident site.

Findings

Not determined	(general) - Unknown/Not determined
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Factual Information

History of Flight

Maneuvering	Unknown or undetermined (Defining event)
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On August 9, 2023, about 1215 Alaska daylight time, a Piper PA-18-150 airplane, N4481Z, was destroyed when it was involved in an accident about 60 miles northwest of Skwentna, Alaska. The pilot and passenger sustained fatal injuries. The airplane was being operated as a Title 14 *Code of Federal Regulations* Part 135 on-demand charter flight.

The airplane was operated by Willow Creek Aviation, LLC, in support of a remote sheep hunting excursion. The passenger and a friend chartered Willow Creek Aviation, LLC, to transport them and their hunting gear to the Dillinger River area. On August 6, 2023, the pilot and the two hunters departed from the Big Lake Airport (PAGQ), Big Lake, Alaska, and conducted a scouting trip in the pilot’s Cessna 206 airplane to check out the Dillinger River area for a possible hunting location and a suitable landing area for the pilot’s PA-18 airplane. The passengers were planning for an 8-to-10-day hunting trip.

On the morning of the accident, about 0830, the pilot and the two hunters departed PAGQ in Willow Creek Aviation’s Cessna 206 airplane and they landed at a remote airstrip in an area referred to as Donkey Creek. The hunters and hunting gear were offloaded and the pilot returned to PAGQ to pick up his PA-18, the accident airplane. The pilot returned to Donkey Creek in the PA-18 and loaded one hunter and his gear for the flight to the hunting location near the Dillinger River (see Figure 1). The pilot informed the other hunter he was expected to return in about 2 hours to pick him up and transport him to the planned hunting location.



Figure

1. Planned flight overview and accident site location.

Based on a cellular phone video from the other hunter, the airplane departed from Donkey Creek about 1150, and no further communications were received from the pilot or passenger. About 1600, after the airplane did not return to Donkey Creek, the hunter contacted family members using a satellite messaging device to see if they were aware of the overdue airplane's status. Over the next several hours, family members and friends attempted to communicate with the pilot and passenger's satellite messaging devices, but those attempts were unsuccessful.

About 2130, a Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) alert notice was issued for the overdue airplane.

Search and rescue operations began that evening by the Alaska Air National Guard Rescue Coordination Center (AKRCC). Initial search flights were then suspended due to poor weather in the identified search area. On August 10th, about 0930, the airplane wreckage was located by the AKRCC at the bottom of an estimated 500 to 600 ft deep narrow ravine of the West Fork of the Yentna River, also known as Shellabarger Pass in Denali National Park and Preserve (see Figures 2 and 3).



Figure

2. Accident site location (airplane circled in red)



Figure

3. Airplane wreckage in bottom of ravine

Pilot Information

Certificate:	Commercial	Age:	45,Male
Airplane Rating(s):	Single-engine land; Single-engine sea; Multi-engine land	Seat Occupied:	Front
Other Aircraft Rating(s):	Helicopter	Restraint Used:	Unknown
Instrument Rating(s):	Airplane	Second Pilot Present:	No
Instructor Rating(s):	None	Toxicology Performed:	Yes
Medical Certification:	Class 2 None	Last FAA Medical Exam:	November 16, 2022
Occupational Pilot:	Yes	Last Flight Review or Equivalent:	
Flight Time:	10000 hours (Total, all aircraft)		

The pilot's logbook was not obtained during the investigation. The pilot's total flight time was recorded from his most recent FAA airman medical application dated November 16, 2022.

Aircraft and Owner/Operator Information

Aircraft Make:	Piper	Registration:	N4481Z
Model/Series:	PA-18-150	Aircraft Category:	Airplane
Year of Manufacture:	1969	Amateur Built:	
Airworthiness Certificate:	Normal	Serial Number:	18-8816
Landing Gear Type:	Tailwheel	Seats:	2
Date/Type of Last Inspection:	April 15, 2023 Annual	Certified Max Gross Wt.:	
Time Since Last Inspection:		Engines:	1 Reciprocating
Airframe Total Time:	2652 Hrs as of last inspection	Engine Manufacturer:	LYCOMING
ELT:	Installed	Engine Model/Series:	O-320-A25
Registered Owner:	On file	Rated Power:	180 Horsepower
Operator:	Willow Creek Aviation, LLC	Operating Certificate(s) Held:	On-demand air taxi (135)
Operator Does Business As:	On file	Operator Designator Code:	EMVC

Meteorological Information and Flight Plan

Conditions at Accident Site:	Visual (VMC)	Condition of Light:	Day
Observation Facility, Elevation:	PAPT,1900 ft msl	Distance from Accident Site:	26 Nautical Miles
Observation Time:	12:48 Local	Direction from Accident Site:	180°
Lowest Cloud Condition:		Visibility	10 miles
Lowest Ceiling:	Broken / 1800 ft AGL	Visibility (RVR):	
Wind Speed/Gusts:	7 knots /	Turbulence Type Forecast/Actual:	/
Wind Direction:	180°	Turbulence Severity Forecast/Actual:	/
Altimeter Setting:	29.58 inches Hg	Temperature/Dew Point:	14°C / 12°C
Precipitation and Obscuration:			
Departure Point:	Skwentna, AK	Type of Flight Plan Filed:	None
Destination:	Skwentna, AK	Type of Clearance:	None
Departure Time:	11:50 Local	Type of Airspace:	Class G

Weather information near the accident site was limited due to a lack of weather reporting facilities in the remote accident location. At 0722 and 1215, the Alaska Aviation Weather Unit (AAWU) issued Airmen's Meteorological Information advisories SIERRA, active for the area that included the accident site, for mountains occasionally obscured by clouds/precipitation with conditions deteriorating.

Aviation-related graphic products issued by the AAWU applicable to the accident time forecasted marginal visual flight rules conditions over or very near the accident site and precipitation across the region.

The 3 closest FAA weather cameras were located about 35 miles west, 25 miles southwest, and 26 miles south of the accident site. There were no weather cameras in Shellabarger Pass.

Wreckage and Impact Information

Crew Injuries:	1 Fatal	Aircraft Damage:	Destroyed
Passenger Injuries:	1 Fatal	Aircraft Fire:	None
Ground Injuries:		Aircraft Explosion:	None
Total Injuries:	2 Fatal	Latitude, Longitude:	62.462453,-152.35866(est)

On August 11th, the day after the wreckage was discovered, the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) investigator-in-charge and Denali National Park rangers traveled to the accident site location but were unable to access the accident site due to steep and unstable terrain conditions. The airplane wreckage was photographed by helicopter, and an NTSB drone was deployed to descend into the canyon to document the accident site and airplane wreckage. Airplane debris and non-aircraft gear were located on the canyon wall about 400 ft above the main wreckage.

Following the accident, multiple attempts of occupant recovery and reconnaissance flights were conducted by the National Park Service (NPS). On September 28th, the NPS suspended recovery operations due to several hazards associated with the accident site location and, according to the NPS, any future recovery operations would be evaluated if environmental conditions improve.

Additional Information

According to the pilot's family, the pilot was equipped with a personal ZOLEO™ satellite communicator device that could provide message and location sharing data. The device was equipped with SOS and Check-in features that may be manually activated by an individual.

Based on available data from the device, the device provided location sharing data about every 12 minutes during the flights on the day of the accident. The last location data was transmitted at 1215 about 9 miles southeast of the accident site near the West Fork of the Yentna River. There were no manually activated SOS or Check-in messages provided by the device.

Administrative Information

Investigator In Charge (IIC): Sauer, Aaron

Additional Participating Persons: Brian Boucher; FAA; Anchorage, AK

Original Publish Date: May 16, 2024

Last Revision Date:

Investigation Class: [Class 3](#)

Note:

Investigation Docket: <https://data.nts.gov/Docket?ProjectID=192841>

The National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) is an independent federal agency charged by Congress with investigating every civil aviation accident in the United States and significant events in other modes of transportation—railroad, transit, highway, marine, pipeline, and commercial space. We determine the probable causes of the accidents and events we investigate, and issue safety recommendations aimed at preventing future occurrences. In addition, we conduct transportation safety research studies and offer information and other assistance to family members and survivors for each accident or event we investigate. We also serve as the appellate authority for enforcement actions involving aviation and mariner certificates issued by the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) and US Coast Guard, and we adjudicate appeals of civil penalty actions taken by the FAA.

The NTSB does not assign fault or blame for an accident or incident; rather, as specified by NTSB regulation, “accident/incident investigations are fact-finding proceedings with no formal issues and no adverse parties ... and are not conducted for the purpose of determining the rights or liabilities of any person” (Title 49 *Code of Federal Regulations* section 831.4). Assignment of fault or legal liability is not relevant to the NTSB’s statutory mission to improve transportation safety by investigating accidents and incidents and issuing safety recommendations. In addition, statutory language prohibits the admission into evidence or use of any part of an NTSB report related to an accident in a civil action for damages resulting from a matter mentioned in the report (Title 49 *United States Code* section 1154(b)). A factual report that may be admissible under 49 *United States Code* section 1154(b) is available [here](#).