

= Jessica Dubroff =

Jessica Whitney Dubroff ( May 5 , 1988 ? April 11 , 1996 ) was a seven @-@ year @-@ old girl who was killed attempting to become the youngest person to fly a light utility aircraft across the United States . On day two of her quest , her Cessna 177B Cardinal single engine propeller aircraft , flown by her flight instructor , crashed during a rainstorm immediately after takeoff from Cheyenne Regional Airport in Cheyenne , Wyoming , killing Dubroff , her 57 @-@ year @-@ old father , and her flight instructor .

Although billed by the media as a " pilot , " Dubroff did not possess a medical certificate or a student pilot certificate , since they require a minimum age of 16 , or a pilot certificate which requires a minimum age of 17 , according to U.S. Federal Aviation Administration ( FAA ) regulations . There was also no record @-@ keeping body at the time of her trip recognizing any feats by under @-@ age pilots . Nevertheless , local , national , and international news media picked up and publicized her story , and closely followed her " record attempt " until its abrupt ending .

The U.S. National Transportation Safety Board ( NTSB ) investigated the crash and concluded it was caused by the flight instructor 's improper decision to take off in poor weather conditions , his overloading the aircraft , and his failure to maintain airspeed , which resulted in a stall . The NTSB also determined that " contributing to the [ instructor 's ] decision to take off was a desire to adhere to an overly ambitious itinerary , in part , because of media commitments . "

= = " Sea to Shining Sea " flight = =

Dubroff was born in Hercules , California to common @-@ law couple Lisa Blair Hathaway and Lloyd Dubroff . Her parents split and her father married another woman , taking then four @-@ year @-@ old Dubroff with him to live in the San Francisco Bay Area .

She began taking flight lessons from flight instructor Joe Reid on her sixth birthday , and became enthusiastic about flying . Her father suggested the idea of a coast @-@ to @-@ coast flight , which Jessica readily accepted , and Reid agreed to provide flight instruction and his aircraft for the endeavor . They decided to name their flight " Sea to Shining Sea " ; Lloyd ordered custom @-@ made caps and T @-@ shirts with that logo to distribute as souvenirs during their stops .

Although she had received over 33 hours of flight training , seven @-@ year @-@ old Jessica did not hold an FAA medical certificate , nor any pilot or student certificate . In the U.S. , a person must be at least 16 years of age to be eligible for a student pilot certificate , and 17 for a pilot certificate . Since Dubroff was not certified to fly the plane , a rated pilot ( normally her flight instructor Reid ) had to be at the controls during all flight operations . While the coast @-@ to @-@ coast flight was promoted as a " record " attempt because of Dubroff 's young age , there was no known body recognizing record flights by under @-@ age " pilots " at the time of her flight ( The Guinness Book of Records had officially discontinued its " youngest pilot " categories seven years earlier , because of the risk of accidents ) .

The flight would be made in Reid 's Cessna 177B Cardinal , a four @-@ seat single @-@ engine propeller aircraft manufactured in 1975 , registered N35207 , which like most aircraft had dual flight controls in the front . Jessica would sit in the front left seat , Reid in the front right , and Lloyd in the back . It was agreed that Reid would be paid for his services at normal flight instruction rates , plus compensation for the layover time . Reid reportedly told his wife that he considered the flight a " non @-@ event for aviation , " simply " flying cross country with a 7 @-@ year @-@ old sitting next to you and the parents paying for it . "

Nevertheless , Jessica became an instant media celebrity . ABC News gave Lloyd a video camera and blank cassettes to tape the flight ; once the journey began , it was vigorously followed by supporters , media outlets , and others who monitored its progress , reporting each time Dubroff landed or took off .

Dubroff slept during one of the flight segments en route to Cheyenne , and was assisted by Reid in one of the landings due to high winds .

= = Final flight segment = =

Dubroff , her father , and her flight instructor arrived in Cheyenne the evening before the accident , after a long day of flying from their Half Moon Bay , California departure point . They were welcomed in Cheyenne by Mayor Leo Pando . After some media interviews they got a ride to their hotel in the car of a local radio station program director , who recalled them discussing the forecast weather conditions for the next day .

The weather in the morning of the accident flight , as forecast , consisted of an area of heavy precipitation over and to the north and west of Cheyenne , with better conditions to the east , where the flight was headed . As the group were about to board their aircraft , the program director who had taken them to their hotel the previous evening interviewed Dubroff by telephone . Since it began to rain at the airport and the weather seemed to be deteriorating , the director invited her to stay in Cheyenne , but Dubroff 's father declined , explaining that they wanted to " beat the storm " which was approaching .

After a telephone discussion with a Casper weather briefer , Reid decided to take off despite the worsening conditions at the airport , and to try to escape the poor weather by turning immediately eastward . Although he was instrument rated , Reid was not instrument current and could not legally operate under instrument flight rules . He decided to file a visual flight rules ( VFR ) flight plan , and depart under VFR , to be better able to cope with the heavy weather in his immediate takeoff path and the vicinity of the airport .

As the aircraft began taxiing to the departure runway , it was raining and visibility at the airport fell below the three mile minimum required for VFR flight . Cheyenne 's control tower advised the Cessna about the reduced visibility and that the " field is IFR . " Reid then requested and received from the control tower a special VFR clearance to allow him to exit the airport 's control zone visually , despite the reduced visibility .

= = Crash = =

At 8 : 24 a.m. MST , Reid 's aircraft began its takeoff from Cheyenne 's runway 30 to the northwest , in rain , strong gusty crosswinds and turbulence . According to witnesses , the plane lifted off and climbed slowly , with its nose high and its wings wobbling . It began a gradual right turn , and after reaching an altitude of a few hundred feet , the plane rolled out of its turn , then descended rapidly , crashing at a near @-@ vertical angle into Kornegay Court , a street in a residential neighborhood . Dubroff , her father , and Reid were all killed by blunt force trauma sustained from impact forces . Reid , who was legally the pilot in command for all of Dubroff 's flights , was apparently manipulating the controls during this particular flight segment .

= = Investigation = =

The National Transportation Safety Board investigated the accident , and published a detailed final report on March 11 , 1997 . From the official point of view , the pilot in command was flight instructor Reid , who was the only one on board rated to fly the aircraft . The investigation focused on his decision @-@ making prior to takeoff and his actions once airborne .

Several experienced pilots who were at the airport at the time of the accident testified that they considered the weather at that time unsuitable for flight , as a thunderstorm seemed to be forming or moving over the field . In addition , investigators determined that the weight of the aircraft during its takeoff roll exceeded its maximum allowable takeoff weight by 96 lbs , which would have increased the stall speed by about two percent . Since the aircraft was flying in moderate to heavy rain , the NTSB calculated that the water flowing on the wings would have further increased the stall speed by about 1 @.@ 5 percent .

Like most flight instructors giving dual instruction , Reid was seated on the right side , while the aircraft 's primary flight instruments were mounted on the left , in front of Dubroff in this case . Investigators speculated that because of the heavy rain in his immediate climb path , Reid 's forward

visibility became greatly restricted . So to maintain control through the climbing right turn , he would have had to turn his head to the left to see the flight instruments ( most critically the attitude and airspeed indicators ) and to the right to see the ground through the side window . Such side @-@ to @-@ side head motion , combined with the worsening flight visibility during the climb and the reduced stall margin , could have led to spatial disorientation and loss of control .

= = = Probable cause = = =

The NTSB concluded that the probable cause of the accident was Reid 's " improper decision to take off into deteriorating weather conditions ( including turbulence , gusty winds , and an advancing thunderstorm and associated precipitation ) when the airplane was overweight and when the density altitude was higher than he was accustomed to , resulting in a stall caused by failure to maintain airspeed . " The NTSB further determined that " contributing to the pilot in command ? s decision to take off was a desire to adhere to an overly ambitious itinerary , in part , because of media commitments . "

= = Aftermath = =

= = = Child Pilot Safety Act = = =

The accident and its associated publicity led to federal legislation to prevent similar " record " attempts by under @-@ age pilots from taking place in the future . The legislation passed the House on September 11 , 1996 , and the Senate on September 18 , 1996 . On September 27 , 1996 , differences between the House and Senate versions of the bill were resolved . On October 9 , 1996 , President Bill Clinton signed the Federal Aviation Reauthorization Act of 1996 , including the Child Pilot Safety Act , into law . The statute prohibits anyone who does not hold at least a private pilot certificate and a current medical certificate from manipulating the controls of an aircraft , if that individual " is attempting to set a record or engage in an aeronautical competition or aeronautical feat . "

Since a medical certificate and a private pilot 's license have a minimum age requirement of 16 and 17 respectively , the new rule prohibits " child pilots " such as Jessica Dubroff and Vicki Van Meter from manipulating the flight controls if they are pursuing a record , and the pilot in command 's pilot certificate may be revoked for allowing such activity .

= = = Media responsibility = = =

After the crash , there were claims that the media frenzy around the " bogus " record attempt contributed to the accident by helping promote the flight and pressuring its schedule . This was supported by the NTSB , which determined that the pressure induced by the intense media attention was a " contributing factor " in the accident . ABC 's Ted Koppel reflected on the media 's role in the tragedy on Nightline : " We need to begin by acknowledging our own contribution ... We feed one another : those of you looking for publicity and those of us looking for stories . " Koppel ended by asking " whether we in the media ... by our ravenous attention contribute to this phenomenon , " and answered : " We did . "

Time featured Jessica 's portrait on its front cover , in which she is seen wearing a gray cap with the inscription , Women Fly . The headline reads , " Who Killed Jessica ? " The child pilot was also featured on the cover of People .

= = = Civil litigation = = =

Lloyd Dubroff , Jessica 's father , was Lisa Blair Hathaway 's common @-@ law husband when Jessica and her brother were born . In 1990 he separated from Hathaway , and in 1991 he married

then 19 @-@ year @-@ old Melinda Anne Hurst , with whom he had a child in 1992 . In December 1992 , Hathaway gave birth to Jessica 's full sister , Jasmine , conceived while she lived for a time with Lloyd and Melinda in California .

Before his death in the crash , Lloyd Dubroff bought four separate life insurance policies , each for US \$ 750 @,@ 000 . Two of the policies named Hathaway as beneficiary and two named Melinda Dubroff , so that each was to receive \$ 1 @.@ 5 million in the event of his death , ensuring adequate child support for his underage children living with the two women . His grown son and daughter ( both in their 30s ) , from a previous marriage , were not addressed by these policies .

After the crash , Melinda Dubroff sued Hathaway for Hathaway 's \$ 1 @.@ 5 million : Melinda Dubroff 's attorney Roy Litherland said in a San Mateo County court that the \$ 1 @.@ 5 million Hathaway was designated was " in excess of any reasonable level of child support . " In December 1996 , Lisa Hathaway filed a counter @-@ suit against Melinda Dubroff and Lloyd Dubroff 's estate for \$ 1 @.@ 5 million , the exact amount of money Lloyd Dubroff intended , saying Lloyd Dubroff " gave his word he would care for and support [ her ] for the rest and remainder of her natural life . "

On December 18 , 1997 , San Mateo County Superior Court Judge Judith Kozloski ruled that the insurance benefits should be split equally between the two women , \$ 1 @.@ 5 million each , and dismissed the other claims .

= = = Burial = = =

Dubroff was buried at Mount Hope Cemetery in Pescadero , San Mateo County , California , USA .