



Aviation Investigation Preliminary Report

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

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. According to preliminary information, 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 subsequently landed at a remote airstrip in an area referred to as Donkey Creek. The hunters and hunting gear were off-loaded, and the pilot returned to PAGQ to pick up his PA-18 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.

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 alert notice (ALNOT) 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 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

Preliminary weather information was limited due to a lack of weather reporting facilities in the remote accident location. An airman's meteorological information (AIRMET) was in effect for occasional mountain obscuration. There were no pilot reports (PIREPs) available within 100 miles and 4 hours of the estimated accident time, and there were no weather cameras within Shellabarger Pass.

On August 11th, the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) investigator-in-charge and Denali National Park rangers traveled to the accident site location by a National Park Service (NPS) helicopter, but the team was 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.

In the days following the accident, multiple attempts of occupant recovery were conducted by the NPS. On August 21st, the National Park Service suspended recovery operations due to

several hazards associated with the accident site location, and according to the NPS, any future recovery operations will be evaluated if environmental conditions improve.

Aircraft and Owner/Operator Information

Aircraft Make:	Piper	Registration:	N4481Z
Model/Series:	PA-18-150	Aircraft Category:	Airplane
Amateur Built:			
Operator:		Operating Certificate(s) Held:	On-demand air taxi (135)
Operator Designator Code:	EMVC		

Meteorological Information and Flight Plan

Conditions at Accident Site:	Unknown	Condition of Light:	Day
Observation Facility, Elevation:		Observation Time:	11:45 Local
Distance from Accident Site:		Temperature/Dew Point:	
Lowest Cloud Condition:		Wind Speed/Gusts, Direction:	/ ,
Lowest Ceiling:		Visibility:	
Altimeter Setting:		Type of Flight Plan Filed:	None
Departure Point:	Skwentna, AK	Destination:	Skwentna, AK

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)

Administrative Information

Investigator In Charge (IIC):	Sauer, Aaron
Additional Participating Persons:	Brian Boucher; FAA; Anchorage, AK
Note:	