

NATIONAL TRANSPORTATION SAFETY BOARD

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Safety Information

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(202) 426-8787

Office of the Chairman

ADVANCE For

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The National Transportation Safety Board today issued its report on the fatal crash of a twin-engine Aero Commander 680E aircraft, owned by Colorado Aviation, Inc., which occurred at 1208 on May 28, 1971, 14 nautical miles northwest of the Municipal Airport at Roanoke, Virginia.

The private pilot flying the aircraft, and five passengers -- including Audie Murphy, America's most decorated World War II hero -- were killed and the aircraft destroyed by impact and fire.

The aircraft departed DeKalb Peachtree Airport, Atlanta, Georgia, at 0910 under visual flight rules for Martinsville, Virginia. Prior to takeoff the pilot had received a weather briefing by telephone for all of the pertinent weather and winds aloft required for the flight. The pilot did not file a flight plan and there was no record of any communications between the pilot and the Federal Aviation Administration en route facilities until he contacted the FAA's Roanoke Flight Service Station at 1149 but did not give a position report.

At this time the pilot was given the latest Roanoke weather observation which was measured ceiling 1,000 feet broken, 2,500 feet overcast, visibility 3 miles in light rain and fog, with "mountain ridges obscured." The pilot then advised he intended to land at Roanoke and Flight Service gave him the latest altimeter setting of 30.11 inches. This was the last known communication with the flight.

The Safety Board determined that the probable cause of this accident was . . .

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". . . the pilot's attempt to continue visual flight into adverse weather conditions at an altitude too low to clear the mountainous terrain. The Board also finds that the pilot attempted to continue flight into instrument weather conditions which were beyond his operational capabilities."

Approximately 19 minutes before the pilot contacted the Roanoke FSS several ground witnesses at Galax, Virginia, about 45 miles west of Martinsville, observed the Aero Commander circling in and out of the cloud base at about 100 to 200 feet altitude. They reported it was "foggy and raining" and that the aircraft circled for about 20 minutes and then the pilot attempted unsuccessfully to land on a four-lane highway by-pass northwest of Galax.

Subsequently, when the aircraft failed to arrive at Martinsville, where friends were waiting, a communication search revealed that the flight had changed destination to Roanoke. When the aircraft failed to arrive at Roanoke, search activities were initiated but due to adverse weather and visibility the Aero Commander wreckage was not located until May 31st.

The crash site was 14 nautical miles northwest of Roanoke at the 2,700-foot level on the western side of Brushy Mountain. The aircraft, flying in a high speed level attitude, first struck and severed two large trees on a steep, heavily wooded slope prior to ground impact which occurred about 1208 e. d. t. It was on a 100 degree heading to the Roanoke VORTAC, a radio navigational station, when the crash occurred, in an area which, at that time, the Board said, would have been obscured by low overcast clouds.

The Board found no evidence of preimpact failure or malfunction of any part of the aircraft structure, systems, or powerplants. All of the navigational aids at the Roanoke Municipal Airport, a VORTAC, an Instrument Landing System, a Non-directional Radio Beacon, and an Airport Surveillance Radar were operating properly at the time of the accident.

The pilot held a private pilot certificate, with airplane single and multi-engine land rating, but did not hold an instrument rating. He was reported to have some 8,000 hours flying time but only about 6 hours time in Aero Commander type aircraft.

Summarizing its findings the Board said that the pilot attempted to fly the aircraft in weather conditions for which he was not properly certificated and for which he did not possess the requisite experience and ability. He also lacked experience in Aero Commander aircraft and in the conduct of flight operations in the Roanoke-Martinsville, Virginia, area.

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