ACC 1211

NATIONAL TRANSPORTATION SAFETY BOARD
WASHINGTON, D.C.

ISSUED: August 3, 1981

Forwarded to:

Honorable J. Lynn Helms
Administrator
Federal Aviation Administration
Washington, D.C. 20591

SAFETY RECOMMENDATION(S)

A-81-80 and 81

At 8:41 p.m., on April 23, 1980, a Mitsubishi MU-2 aircraft, N307MA, crashed about 1/2 mile north of Sky Harbor Airport, Henderson, Nevada. The aircraft was a night visual flight rules (VFR) arrival, and the pilot had intended to land at McCarran International Airport, Las Vegas, Nevada.

At 8:38 p.m., the pilot declared an emergency low-fuel status, McCarran Approach Control acknowledged the emergency and then advised the pilot that McCarran International Airport was 12 o'clock and that Sky Harbor Airport was at 10 o'clock. The controller then asked, "Are you going to try for McCarran or do you want to go to Sky Harbor? It's about 5, 6 miles to McCarran, 4 miles to Sky Harbor." The pilot replied that he was "heading for Sky Harbor at this point." The pilot later reported, "I don't see the airport, sir." The controller then asked another aircraft, N35211, that had been in the vicinity of Sky Harbor Airport, "Were the lights out at Sky Harbor when you went over there?" N35211 replied, ". . . negative lights at Sky Harbor." The controller then said, "OK we're going to call now to get them on. . . ." The controller then asked N35211 aircraft ". . . change to unicom, click your mike twice and see if that'll get the lights on there at Sky Harbor." Shortly thereafter, N35211 reported that the Mitsubishi just crashed and that there was a "big explosion upon impact." Witnesses later reported that the aircraft "started to climb, snapped over, and went into a spin."

Investigation of the accident revealed that the Sky Harbor Airport is an unlighted airport (there were no lights available to be turned on), there was sufficient fuel (about 17 gallons at the time of impact) to fly to McCarran International Airport, and the aircraft had no mechanical malfunctions. The Safety Board concluded that the pilot diverted his attention from the operation of his aircraft while searching for the unlighted airport.

The Safety Board is aware of the existence of an ATC software modification which would have insured that the controller relayed correct information to the pilot. Houston International Airport is currently using the Airport Data, Point to Point Range and Bearing Slew Entry (an Automated Radar Terminal System--ARTS III program patch) to provide a controller with complete airport information, such as runways, elevation, lighting, and range and bearing from an aircraft's position to the airport. This information is presented on the controller's radar display. Any ARTS facility has the capability of utilizing this feature, which was developed by the Federal Aviation Administration's (FAA) Data Systems Staff at the Houston International Airport. The Safety Board believes that the emergency airport data is a valuable safety feature and that the accident at the Sky Harbor Airport, as well as others that the Safety Board has investigated, could have been prevented had such data been immediately available to the controller. The Safety Board does not believe that this feature should be a substitute for local area knowledge required of the controller but should be considered to be a type of reinforcement much like the checklist in an aircraft. The Safety Board also believes that the same type of emergency airport data should be made available to the en route controller when the next Air Route Traffic Control Center (ARTCC) computer equipment is implemented.

Therefore, the National Transportation Safety Board recommends that the Federal Aviation Administration:

> Require that all terminal facilities utilizing Automated Radar Terminal Systems (ARTS automation) incorporate an emergency airport information feature, such as that currently used at the Houston International Airport. (Class II, Priority Action) (A-81-80)
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> Incorporate the features required to enable en route controllers to display emergency airport information, such as that currently displayed at the Houston International Airport, in future en route air traffic control computer systems. (Class II, Priority Action) (A-81-81)

KING, Chairman, DRIVER, Vice Chairman, McADAMS, GOLDMAN, and BURSLEY, Members, concurred in these recommendations.

By: James B. King
Chairman