

Log 1841 SP 20

NATIONAL TRANSPORTATION SAFETY BOARD
WASHINGTON, D.C.

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Forwarded to:

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SAFETY RECOMMENDATION(S)

A-85-116

About 1330 Pacific standard time on January 30, 1984, a Gates Learjet, Model 24, N44GA, owned by Gee Bee Aero, Inc., and operated by Aviation Business Flights of San Jose, California, overran the end of runway 22 during an attempted landing at the Catalina Airport, Santa Catalina Island, Avalon, California. The airplane departed the end of the runway onto a nonpaved surface and traveled off a 90-foot-high bluff impacting upright on downsloping terrain. The airplane was destroyed by severe impact forces and a postcrash fire. The four passengers and two flightcrew members on board were fatally injured. 1/

The Unicom operator called the fire department immediately after the crash. Four airport personnel arrived on scene within 3 minutes of the accident with a small truck equipped with an "Ansul" firefighting unit, two firefighter proximity suits, and 700 pounds of dry chemicals. However, because they were not trained in crash/fire/rescue (CFR) procedures, they did not attempt to extinguish the fire for fear the airplane would explode. They stated that there was a period of time that the forward cabin was free of fire. Several units from the Avalon fire station arrived on scene about 20 minutes later and were told by airport personnel that there were no survivors. The fire was contained about 10 minutes later and completely extinguished about 20 minutes later.

1/ For more detailed information, read Aircraft Accident/Incident Summary--"Gee Bee Aero, Inc., Gates Learjet Model 24, N44GA, Catalina Airport, Avalon, California, January 30, 1984" (NTSB/AAR-85/03/SUM).

Catalina Airport is a private airport, open to public use, and is owned and operated by the Santa Catalina Island Conservancy. The airport has no scheduled airline service and, thus, is not subject to any State or Federal regulation regarding CFR capability. The County of Los Angeles Fire Department on Santa Catalina Island is responsible for the CFR response at the airport. The City of Avalon Fire Department, by mutual agreement, assists the County Fire Department whenever necessary. Both fire departments are co-located in the city of Avalon, 10 miles from the airport. The road leading to the airport from the city of Avalon is steep, narrow, and winding, and does not lend itself to high vehicle speeds. Consequently, the 20-minute travel time of the units to reach the accident scene from Avalon probably was the minimum that could have been expected. Based on aircraft accident survival data, a 20-minute response time is unacceptable because occupants who cannot escape or be removed from a burning airplane in 2 minutes or less time are not likely to survive.

As of February 1984, there had been a total of 56,566 aircraft operations at the Catalina Airport during the previous 12 months, including 3,768 nonscheduled and 52,798 general aviation operations involving a total of 57,881 passengers. In the last 16 years, the Catalina Airport has had 24 other accidents which fortunately did not result in any fatalities. However, given the number of aircraft operations each year and the number of passengers involved, the potential exists for an accident such as the one involving N44GA to occur again, possibly with the same tragic results, since the safety areas at both ends of the runway are very short and the terrain drops off precipitously at both ends. This airport has a very unforgiving environment in the event of an undershoot or overrun type of accident.

The Safety Board believes that there are several ways in which the CFR capability at the airport could be improved:

- (1) A fully trained Los Angeles County CFR unit or an Avalon City Fire Department unit could be stationed at the airport during its operating hours; 2/ or
- (2) Airport personnel could be trained in CFR techniques by the Los Angeles County and Avalon City Fire Departments under the guidelines provided by the Federal Aviation Administration's (FAA) Advisory Circular 139.49, "Programs for Training of Fire Fighting and Rescue Personnel"; or
- (3) One or more trained CFR personnel from the Los Angeles County and Avalon City Fire Departments could be stationed at the airport during operating hours to direct airport personnel who have some training in CFR procedures in responding to an accident.

2/ The operating hours of the airport are 0800-1900 from June to September and 0800-1700 from October to May.

Therefore, the National Transportation Safety Board recommends that the County of Los Angeles Fire Department, the Santa Catalina Island Conservancy, and the City of Avalon Fire Department:

Improve the current crash/fire/rescue (CFR) capability at the Catalina Airport by: (1) stationing a fully trained CFR unit at the airport during its operating hours; or (2) training airport personnel in CFR techniques under the guidelines provided by Federal Aviation Administration Advisory Circular 139-49; or (3) stationing one or more trained CFR personnel at the airport during operating hours to direct airport personnel who have some training in CFR procedures. (Class II, Priority Action) (A-85-116)

The National Transportation Safety Board is an independent Federal agency with the statutory responsibility ". . . to promote transportation safety by conducting independent accident investigations and by formulating safety improvement recommendations" (Public Law 93-633). The Safety Board is vitally interested in any actions taken as a result of its safety recommendations and would appreciate a response from you regarding action taken or contemplated with respect to the recommendation in this letter. Please refer to Safety Recommendation A-85-116 in your reply.

BURNETT, Chairman, GOLDMAN, Vice Chairman, or BURSLEY, Member, concurred in this recommendation.

By: 
Jim Burnett
Chairman