



AIRCRAFT ACCIDENT INVESTIGATION SUMMARY REPORT

Reference No.

SI/771/1012

Publication of this report is authorized by the Secretary under the provisions of Air Navigation Regulations 283 (1)

1. LOCATION OF OCCURRENCE

26 kilometres west-south-west of Townsville, Qld.	Height a.m.s.l. 750 feet	Date 26.5.77	Time (Local) 1555 hours	Zone EST
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2. THE AIRCRAFT

Make and Model Cessna 310R	Registration VH-ROC	Certificate of Airworthiness Valid from 26.6.75
Certificate of Registration issued to [REDACTED]	Operator [REDACTED]	Degree of damage to aircraft Destroyed
		Other property damaged Nil
Defects discovered Nil		

3. THE FLIGHT

Last or intended departure point Julia Creek	Time of departure 1413 hours	Next point of intended landing Townsville	Purpose of flight Carriage of Passengers	Class of operation Charter
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4. THE CREW

Name	Status	Age	Class of licence	Hours on type	Total hours	Degree of injury
[REDACTED]	Pilot	27	Commercial	41	560	Fatal

5. OTHER PERSONS (All passengers and persons injured on ground)

Name	Status	Degree of injury	Name	Status	Degree of injury
[REDACTED]	Passenger	Fatal	[REDACTED]	Passenger	Fatal
[REDACTED]	Passenger	Fatal	[REDACTED]	Passenger	Fatal

6. RELEVANT EVENTS

The pilot obtained and studied relevant meteorological forecasts and submitted to Townsville Air Traffic Control a flight plan for a flight Townsville-Julia Creek-Townsville, operating in accordance with the Visual Flight Rules (VFR). He did not hold an instrument rating and was therefore restricted to VFR operations. The planned route was via Thornton Gap and Wando Vale on each sector and the nominated cruising altitudes were 8000 feet outbound and 7000 feet on the return sector. The forecasts indicated that VFR flight in accordance with the flight plan would be possible but, over the eastern section of the route, scattered stratus cloud base 1000/2000 feet and visibility decreasing to 5000 metres was expected in rain showers. The forecast for Townsville indicated that, between 1200 and 1800 hours for periods not exceeding 30 minutes, there would be heavy rain showers with 5/8 stratus cloud base 1000 feet and visibility decreasing to 4000 metres.

The flight from Townsville to Julia Creek was completed without known incident and with only the pilot on board. Four passengers boarded at Julia Creek and the return flight to Townsville commenced.

Shortly after the aircraft departed Julia Creek, the pilot was advised of amended forecast cloud conditions for the eastern section of the route. The amended forecast included scattered stratus cloud base 1000/2000 feet, scattered cumulus cloud base 2000 feet to 4000 feet and scattered strato-cumulus. At 1439 hours the pilot reported his position as abeam of Richmond and that his amended cruising altitude was 9000 feet.

At about 1445 hours weather conditions in the Townsville Control Zone began to deteriorate with rain and reduced visibility. A Special weather report issued at Townsville at 1500 hours indicated visibility 6000 metres in heavy showers with 2/8 stratus cloud base 600 feet. This report and subsequent special weather reports issued at 1510 hours and 1530 hours were not communicated to VH-ROC. At 1520 hours the pilot reported his position to Townsville Flight Service Unit (FSU) as Wando Vale, on descent to 5000 feet, and his estimated time of arrival at Townsville at 1600 hours. He was advised that the Townsville Control Zone was then closed to VFR operations, the Thornton Gap was closed and that Townsville Air Traffic Control considered his most suitable route to be via Charters Towers.

6. Relevant Events (Cont'd)

At 1528 hours the pilot asked if it seemed that Thornton Gap was "going to clear in the near future or not" and he was advised that advice from the Control Tower was "your best chance would be below two via the Charters Towers railway line. It doesn't look as though Thornton Gap will clear. We are open now VFR to the north through east to south but still closed to the west and south-west". The pilot replied that he would be tracking via Charters Towers.

By 1533 hours the Control Zone was opened to VFR operations but Thornton Gap, which is outside the Zone, appeared to be still in an area of adverse weather. At 1539 hours the pilot asked for an appraisal of the weather at Thornton Gap adding that "from my present position I can see the western side and it appears to be fairly good". He was informed that the tower controllers could not see much past Mount Bohle (some 7 km west of the airport) in that direction. The pilot then advised that "west of the ranges the cloud base is approximately three thousand and only broken cumulus".

At 1541 hours the pilot reported "from my position I can see most of Thornton Gap. I'd like a clearance to track via Thornton Gap". The aircraft was then operating outside controlled airspace and the pilot was instructed to call Townsville Approach Control approaching Thornton Gap.

The pilot established communication with Townsville Approach Control at 1548 hours and advised "approaching Thorntons Gap at three thousand. Request clearance through Thorntons Gap. From the western side Thorntons Gap looks quite okay. The shower activity just between Thorntons Gap and the City". The aircraft was given a clearance to make a visual approach via Thornton Gap and was requested to "report one five DME". At 1550 hours, on request, the pilot advised he was 23 miles by DME from the airport and at 1554 hours, again on request, reported DME distance as "one six and we're approaching one thousand". He was instructed to continue a visual approach, given information on traffic in the circuit area and requested to report again when 10 miles by DME. The pilot did not acknowledge this instruction and information and there was no response to subsequent calls directed to the aircraft by Approach Control. The Alert Phase of Search and Rescue procedures was declared at 1605 hours and an Army helicopter operating in the area commenced search action.

The helicopter checked the eastern side of the Thornton Gap area and the pilot advised that the cloud was "right on the ground". The Distress Phase was declared at 1615 hours and, at this time, the helicopter pilot estimated the cloud base as 750 feet, some 300 feet below the level of the Gap. There was drizzling rain in the area. Soon after 1630 hours, the wreckage of VH-ROC was located on the south-eastern side of Mount Cataract, some 8 km north-east of Thornton Gap and 4 km north of the track bearing 062° magnetic from Thornton Gap to Townsville.

The aircraft had struck trees near the crest of the hill on the heading of about 015° in a slightly right wing low attitude, climbing on a 5° gradient. It was severely damaged by contact with the trees and dived steeply to the ground while rolling to the left. Detailed examination of the aircraft did not reveal any evidence of unserviceability or malfunction which might have contributed to the accident.

Evidence of persons on the ground in the vicinity of Thornton Gap and the accident site indicates that there was drizzle, rain periods, low cloud and reduced visibility in the area throughout the day.

7. OPINION AS TO CAUSE

The probable cause of the accident was that the pilot continued the flight into weather conditions in which he was not able to maintain the visual references necessary to ensure adequate terrain clearance.

Approved for
Signature

G. V. Hughes

(G. V. Hughes)
Delegate of the Secretary

Date

16.10.79