Australian Government
Australian Transport Safety Bureau

Collision with terrain involving Piper PA-32R-300, VH-JVA

Shellharbour Airport, New South Wales, on 11 October 2025

ATSB Transport Safety Report
Aviation Occurrence Investigation
AO-2025-064
Preliminary – 14 November 2025

Cover photo: Clinton J Down Photography, modified by ATSB

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Postal address: GPO Box 321, Canberra, ACT 2601
Office: 12 Moore Street, Canberra, ACT 2601
Telephone: 1800 020 616, from overseas +61 2 6257 2463
Accident and incident notification: 1800 011 034 (24 hours)
Email: atsbinfo@atsb.gov.au
Website: atsb.gov.au

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The Australian Transport Safety Bureau acknowledges the traditional owners of country throughout Australia, and their continuing connection to land, sea and community. We pay our respects to them and their cultures, and to elders both past and present.

Preliminary report

This preliminary report details factual information established in the investigation's early evidence collection phase, and has been prepared to provide timely information to the industry and public. Preliminary reports contain no analysis or findings, which will be detailed in the investigation's final report. The information contained in this preliminary report is released in accordance with section 25 of the *Transport Safety Investigation Act 2003*.

The occurrence

On the morning of 11 October 2025, a Piper PA-32R-300 Cherokee Lance, registered VH-JVA, taxied for a private flight from Shellharbour Airport to Bathurst Airport, New South Wales. The flight was being operated under the instrument flight rules[1] with the pilot and 2 passengers on board.

At 0956 local time, as the aircraft approached runway 26, the pilot announced on the Shellharbour common traffic advisory frequency (CTAF) that the aircraft was entering the runway and lining up to depart. The pilot then taxied the aircraft onto the runway starter extension[2] and lined up. While VH-JVA was lined up, a Cessna Caravan taxiing behind VH-JVA stopped at the holding point at the runway 26 threshold. The pilot of VH-JVA invited the pilot of the Cessna to depart ahead of VH-JVA and the Cessna took-off shortly after.

About a minute after the Cessna departed, VH-JVA began a take-off from runway 26. Following a ground roll of about 410 m, VH-JVA abruptly pitched up and yawed left as it became airborne. The aircraft then climbed away from the runway in a nose high attitude while skidding[3] and rolling left (Figure 1 and Figure 2).

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1 Instrument flight rules (IFR): a set of regulations that permit the pilot to operate an aircraft in instrument meteorological conditions (IMC), which have much lower weather minimums than visual flight rules (VFR). Procedures and training are significantly more complex as a pilot must demonstrate competency in IMC conditions while controlling the aircraft solely by reference to instruments. IFR-capable aircraft have greater equipment and maintenance requirements.

2 The runway starter extension is additional runway length available for take-off (not landing) before the runway threshold.

3 A skidding turn is an uncoordinated turn where the fuselage of the aircraft is not aligned with the airflow. In a skid the tail of the aircraft follows a path that is outside of that followed by the nose.

Figure 1: Composite image of recorded security camera footage of the whole flight

Source: Supplied, annotated by the ATSB

Figure 2: Composite image of recorded security camera footage of later part of flight

Source: Shellharbour Airport, annotated by the ATSB

The angle of bank then appeared to stabilise briefly as the aircraft followed a left-turning flight path. As it turned to a heading of about 200° magnetic (M), it reached a maximum recorded altitude of about 50 ft above ground level (AGL) and then began descending. Three seconds after reaching 50 ft AGL, the angle of bank and descent rate began increasing rapidly before the aircraft collided with terrain, coming to rest at the threshold of the intersecting runway (runway 34). The pilot and passengers were fatally injured in the accident, and the aircraft was destroyed.

Context

Pilot details

The pilot held a private pilot licence (aeroplane) and the required class rating and endorsements to operate the aircraft. The pilot also held a private instrument rating and Class 2 aviation medical certificate, which were both current at the time of the accident.

The pilot's logbook was reported to be in the aircraft during the accident flight. The cabin area of the aircraft was extensively fire damaged following the accident and the logbook could not be located during the wreckage examination. At the pilot's last medical examination, the pilot had declared a total of 1,015 hours aeronautical experience. Maintenance release entries for VH-JVA showed that since that medical examination, the pilot had flown 27.1 hours in the aircraft. Of these, 4.6 hours were in the 90 days before the accident and none in the 30 days before the accident.

Aircraft details

The Piper PA-32R-300 Cherokee Lance is a single-engine, low-wing, retractable tricycle landing gear aircraft. The Lance is powered by a Lycoming IO-540 fuel-injected, horizontally opposed piston engine driving a three-blade variable-pitch propeller and is fitted with dual controls. VH-JVA (Figure 3), serial number 32R-7680030, was manufactured in the United States in 1975 and first registered in Australia in 1985. The most recent periodic inspection was completed on 14 May 2025, at 3,898.2 hours total time in service. At the time of the accident, VH-JVA had accumulated 3,915 hours in service.

Figure 3: VH-JVA

Source: Clinton J Down Photography, modified by the ATSB

Aircraft loading

The pilot and a passenger were in the 2 front seats while the other passenger was seated in the second row. Witness statements and fuel records indicated that the aircraft departed with full tanks.

The purpose of the flight was an overnight stay at Bathurst before returning to Shellharbour the following day. No large or heavy items were identified in the aircraft during the examination of the wreckage and the ATSB estimated the aircraft to be within weight and balance limitations for the flight.

Meteorological information

The terminal area forecast valid for Shellharbour Airport at the time of the accident included winds of 10 kt from 257° M. Severe turbulence[4] was also forecast below 5,000 ft AMSL. From 1000, the winds were forecast to increase in strength to 15 kt with gusts to 25 kt.

At 0959, as the aircraft departed runway 26, the Bureau of Meteorology automatic weather station at Shellharbour Airport recorded the temperature as 27°C and the wind as 12 kt from 278° M. There was no recorded cloud, and visibility was recorded as greater than 10 km.

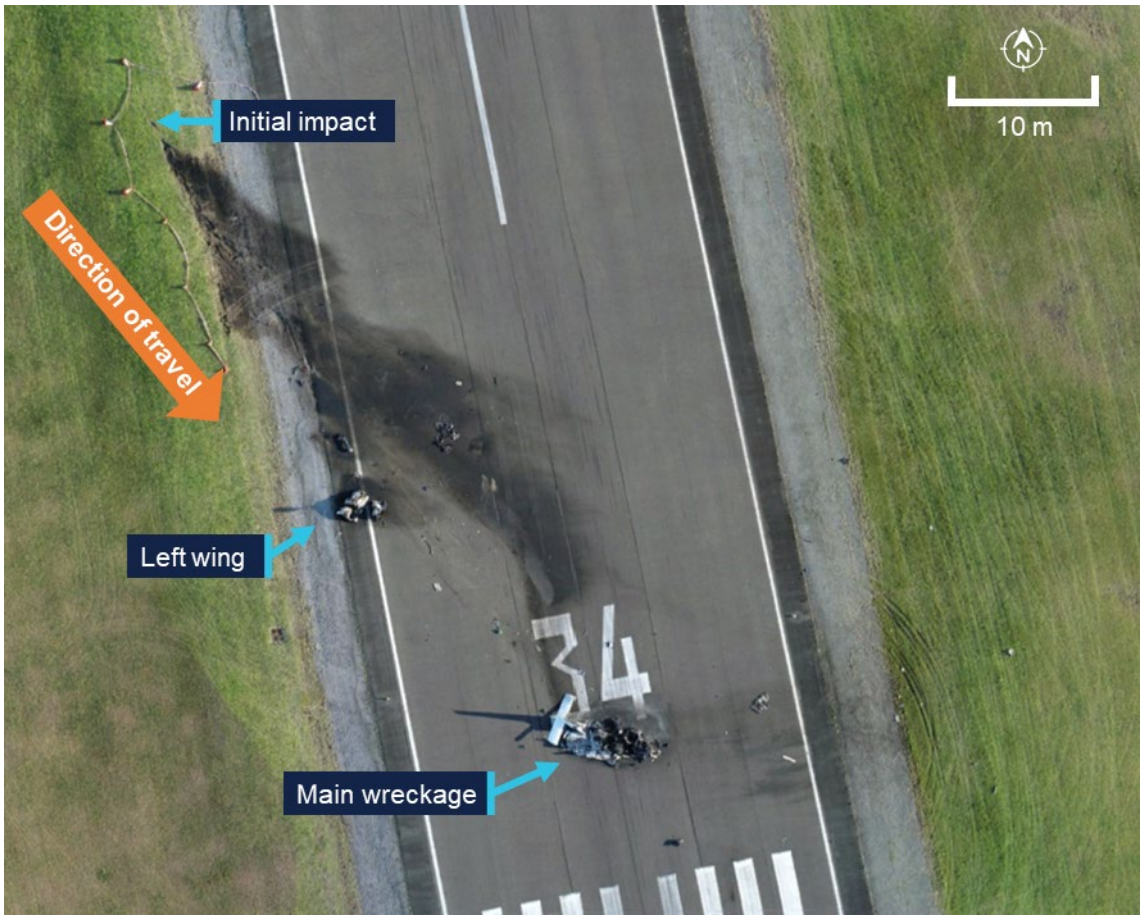
The pilot of the preceding Cessna reported that, during their departure, the winds were gusty with light windshear and moderate turbulence. This pilot also stated that this was common for Shellharbour Airport with strong westerly winds. The accident pilot and aircraft were based at Shellharbour Airport, and the pilot was reported to be familiar with mechanical turbulence associated with strong westerly winds at the airport.

Impact and wreckage information

The aircraft impacted the ground to the west of runway 34 while travelling in the 138° M direction (Figure 4). The left wing tip impacted the ground first with the aircraft at near 90° angle of bank and a slightly nose down attitude. The propeller and engine then impacted the ground 12 m from the wing tip and ground scars consistent with propeller strikes were indicative of engine rotation. The left wing separated from the aircraft and the main wreckage continued along the ground for a further 47 m before coming to rest on runway 34 near the runway threshold. The integral fuel tanks in both wings ruptured during the accident sequence, leading to a post-impact fire that destroyed most of the fuselage.

[4] Moderate turbulence is usually associated with small changes in airspeed and moderate changes to aircraft attitude and/or altitude, but the aircraft remains under positive control. Severe turbulence is associated with large changes in airspeed and abrupt changes to aircraft attitude and/or altitude; in severe turbulence the aircraft may be out of control for short periods.

Figure 4: Accident site



Source: ATSB

The ATSB conducted an initial examination of the wreckage at the accident site before moving the wreckage to an airport hangar for further examination. All major aircraft components were accounted for at the accident site. The damage to the propeller indicated that the engine was driving the propeller at the time of impact. The landing gear was extended and the flaps were extended to the 10-degree setting. The stabilator trim was set to slightly nose up and the rudder trim was neutral. Damage to the pilot's seat rails indicated that it was locked in an appropriate position. The left pin of the passenger's seat was found secured in the rearmost position while the right pin was found not secured into a position. There was no damage to the outboard passenger seat rail stop to indicate that this seat had slid rearward.[5]

Recorded data

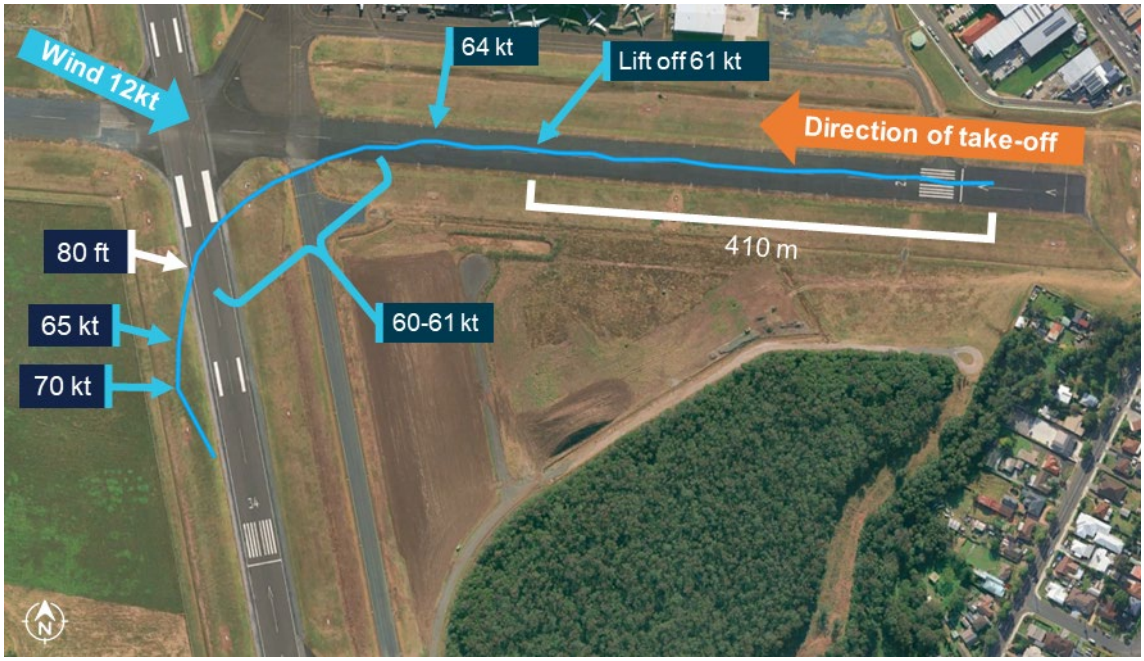
Recorded automatic dependent surveillance broadcast (ADS-B) data and a number of security cameras captured the flight (Figure 5). A witness also captured 2 photographs of the aircraft while airborne (Figure 6). The data showed that:

- during the take-off ground roll, until the nose wheel lifted from the runway, the take-off appeared normal and the stabilator was in a neutral position
- the recorded groundspeed at the time the aircraft became airborne was 61 kt

[5] The seat rail stops limit the fore/aft seat movement, ensuring that the seat feet remain attached to the rails.

- the groundspeed increased to 64 kt as the aircraft commenced turning left and then remained between 60–61 kt as the aircraft turned through 180° M. As the turn continued and with an increasing tailwind component, the groundspeed increased to the recorded maximum of 70 kt immediately before impact
- all doors appeared to be correctly secured.

Figure 5: Flight path and recorded data from flight



All speeds are groundspeed, and the altitude is above mean sea level (equating to about 50 ft above ground level).
Source: Google Earth, Bureau of Meteorology, Avdata and publicly available ADSB data, annotated by the ATSB

Figure 6: Photographs of VH-JVA during the accident flight

Source: Ari Bone and Google Earth, modified by the ATSB

A Garmin 750 navigation unit was recovered from the aircraft wreckage and retained by the ATSB for further investigation.

Shellharbour Airport CTAF recordings captured no further broadcasts from the pilot of VH-JVA following those made prior to take-off.

Further investigation

To date, the ATSB has examined the site and wreckage, conducted interviews and collected documentation and recorded data relating to the accident flight.

The investigation is continuing and will include further review and examination of:

- recorded data
- aircraft documentation

- aircraft maintenance records
- recovered aircraft components
- pilot medical records, qualifications, and experience.

A final report will be released at the conclusion of the investigation. Should a critical safety issue be identified during the course of the investigation, the ATSB will immediately notify relevant parties so appropriate and timely safety action can be taken.

Acknowledgements

The ATSB would like to acknowledge the assistance of New South Wales Police, Shellharbour Airport, and the airport hangar operator during the onsite stage of the investigation.

General details

Occurrence details

Date and time:	11 October 2025 – 0959 Eastern Daylight-saving Time	
Occurrence class:	Accident	
Occurrence categories:	Collision with terrain	
Location:	Shellharbour Airport, New South Wales	
	Latitude: 34.5651° S	Longitude: 150.7882° E

Aircraft details

Manufacturer and model:	Piper Aircraft Corp PA-32R-300	
Registration:	VH-JVA	
Serial number:	32R-7680030	
Type of operation:	Private	
Departure:	Shellharbour Airport, New South Wales	
Destination:	Bathurst Airport, New South Wales	
Persons on board:	Crew – 1	Passengers – 2
Injuries:	Crew – 1 (fatal)	Passengers – 2 (fatal)
Aircraft damage:	Destroyed	

About the ATSB

The **Australian Transport Safety Bureau** is the national transport safety investigator. Established by the *Transport Safety Investigation Act 2003* (TSI Act), the ATSB is an independent statutory agency of the Australian Government and is governed by a Commission. The ATSB is entirely separate from transport regulators, policy makers and service providers.

The ATSB's function is to improve transport safety in aviation, rail and shipping through:

- the independent investigation of transport accidents and other safety occurrences
- safety data recording, analysis, and research
- influencing safety action.

The ATSB prioritises investigations that have the potential to deliver the greatest public benefit through improvements to transport safety.

The ATSB performs its functions in accordance with the provisions of the *Transport Safety Investigation Act 2003* and Regulations and, where applicable, international agreements.

Purpose of safety investigations

The objective of a safety investigation is to enhance transport safety. This is done through:

- identifying safety issues and facilitating safety action to address those issues
- providing information about occurrences and their associated safety factors to facilitate learning within the transport industry.

It is not a function of the ATSB to apportion blame or provide a means for determining liability. At the same time, an investigation report must include factual material of sufficient weight to support the analysis and findings.

At all times the ATSB endeavours to balance the use of material that could imply adverse comment with the need to properly explain what happened, and why, in a fair and unbiased manner.

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