



# Collision with terrain

## 3 km N Bathurst Airport, NSW - 7 November 2008

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Australian Transport Safety Bureau  
 PO Box 967, Civic Square ACT 2608  
 Australia  
 1800 020 616  
 +61 2 6257 4150 from overseas  
[www.atsb.gov.au](http://www.atsb.gov.au)

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### Abstract

At about 2026 Eastern Daylight-saving Time on 7 November 2008, a Piper Aircraft Corp PA-31-350 Chieftain, registered VH-OPC, collided with terrain. The aircraft was seriously damaged and the four occupants were fatally injured. An ATSB investigation was commenced and is continuing.

### FACTUAL INFORMATION

*The information contained in this preliminary report is derived from initial investigation of the occurrence. Readers are cautioned that there is the possibility that new evidence may become available that alters the circumstances as depicted in this report.*

### Sequence of events

On 7 November 2008, a Piper Aircraft Corp PA-31-350 Chieftain, registered VH-OPC, was being operated on a private flight under the instrument flight rules from Moorabbin Airport, Vic. to Port Macquarie, NSW via Bathurst, NSW. On board the aircraft were the owner-pilot and three passengers.

The aircraft departed Moorabbin Airport at about 1730 Eastern Daylight-saving Time<sup>1</sup> and arrived at Bathurst Airport at about 1934. The pilot added 355 L of Avgas to the aircraft from a self-service bowser.

At about 2012, the engines were started and at 2016 the aircraft was taxiing for the holding point of runway 35. The aircraft was at the holding point

for about 3 minutes, reportedly at high engine power. At 2020, the pilot broadcast that he was entering and backtracking runway 35 and at 2022 the pilot broadcast that he was departing (airborne) runway 35. There was no record or reports of any further radio transmissions from the pilot.

At about 2026, a number of residents of Forest Grove, north of Bathurst Airport, heard a sudden loud noise from an aircraft at a relatively low height overhead, shortly followed by the noise of an explosion and the glow of a fire. Emergency services were notified and subsequently attended the accident site.

The aircraft was seriously damaged and the four occupants were fatally injured.

Figure 1: Accident site location (circled)



1 The 24-hour clock is used in this report to describe the local time of day. Eastern Daylight-saving Time (EDT) was Coordinated Universal Time (UTC) + 11 hours.

## Wreckage and accident site information

The initial impact point was 1.9 km north-east of the departure end of runway 35 with a descent angle over trees calculated as greater than 20 degrees. The aircraft was upright and right wing low at impact.

**Figure 2: Initial impact marks (looking in direction of travel)**



The wreckage trail was orientated on 165 degrees magnetic (generally towards the airport) and extended for about 300 m, with some small heavy items further on. There was evidence of fire along the wreckage trail and most of the wreckage was fire affected.

**Figure 3: Main wreckage (looking back towards initial impact point)**



The bending of the propellers indicated that at the time of impact, both propellers had rotational energy and the left engine was producing less power/torque than the right engine.

There was no evidence of pre-impact structural or flight control defects.

Both engines and propellers and a number of other components were retained for further examination.

## Pilot information

The pilot held a Commercial Pilot (Aeroplane) Licence, issued in 1983, and a Command Instrument Rating (Multi-engine aeroplane), issued in 1982. The pilot was endorsed on the Chieftain type of aircraft in 1991 and was endorsed on other light twin-engine types.

The pilot completed a Class 1 medical examination in June 2008. At that time, he stated his total flying hours as 2,061.

## Aircraft information

The aircraft was manufactured in the US in 1979 and was first registered in Australia in 1989. At the time of the accident, the aircraft had about 11,000 hours total time in service. In 2001, the aircraft was refurbished, which included overhaul of both engines and modification that incorporated the following:

- Colemill Enterprises Inc. Panther II kit, including winglets, four-blade propellers, unfeathering accumulators and wing tip landing lights
- American Aviation Inc. Ultra Cooling system engine Intercoolers
- Boundary Layer Research gross weight increase kit including vortex generators.

**Figure 4: VH-OPC**



Photo courtesy of Phil Vabre

The most recent maintenance performed on the aircraft was in October 2008, when a 50-hour inspection, including oil and filter change and inspection of the engines, was carried out.

## **Meteorological information**

Witnesses reported that at the time of the accident there was a high overcast and light rain or drizzle.

The end of civil twilight (last light) for Bathurst Airport was 2000.

## **Further investigation**

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

- the accident and impact sequence
- meteorological information
- recorded radar data
- retained aircraft components
- pilot flying history
- post mortem results.