



# National Transportation Safety Board Aviation Accident Final Report

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<b>Location:</b>	Pescadero, California	<b>Accident Number:</b>	WPR19FAMS1
<b>Date &amp; Time:</b>	June 26, 2019, 21:02 Local	<b>Registration:</b>	N3504A
<b>Aircraft:</b>	Cessna 172	<b>Aircraft Damage:</b>	Destroyed
<b>Defining Event:</b>	Unknown or undetermined	<b>Injuries:</b>	1 Fatal
<b>Flight Conducted Under:</b>	Part 91: General aviation		

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## Analysis

Radar data indicated that the pilot departed around dusk and proceeded over the ocean, paralleling the coastline for about 20 miles before radar contact was lost about 3 miles offshore. Several persons in a campground that overlooked the ocean, witnessed an aircraft impact the water a few miles offshore; although they immediately notified law enforcement, who in turn notified the US Coast Guard (USCG), based on the lack of any reported missing or distressed aircraft in the region, the USCG did not initiate a physical search of the reported impact site at that time.

The airplane was leased by a flying club and was discovered missing the following day when it could not be located by a club member who had scheduled to fly it. A USCG search several days later in the area of the last radar contact revealed no evidence of the missing airplane or pilot.

According to the flying club president, the pilot was not authorized to fly any of the club airplanes solo at the time of his disappearance, although he had been previously. To date, no subsequent traces of either the missing pilot or the airplane have been located; the airplane is presumed destroyed by impact in the ocean, and the pilot is presumed to have been fatally injured.

## Probable Cause and Findings

The National Transportation Safety Board determines the probable cause(s) of this accident to be: Impact with the ocean for reasons that could not be determined because the airplane was not located.

## Findings

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<b>Not determined</b>	(general) - Unknown/Not determined
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## Factual Information

### History of Flight

Maneuvering	Unknown or undetermined (Defining event)
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On June 26, 2019, about 2037 Pacific daylight time, a Cessna 172S, N3504A, departed Watsonville, California, for an unknown destination. Since that time, neither the airplane nor the person presumed to be the pilot has been located. The airplane is presumed to have been destroyed by impact in the Pacific Ocean, and the pilot is presumed to have received fatal injuries. The airplane was operated as a Title 14 *Code of Federal Regulations* Part 91 personal flight.

Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) ground-based radar tracking data for June 26 revealed a series of transponder code 1200 returns from an aircraft that appeared to have departed from Watsonville Municipal airport (WVI) starting at 2038:34. The first radar data return indicated an altitude of 200 ft mean sea level (msl), and the track was consistent with a departure from runway 20. The airplane flew a course to the southwest in a constant climb until it reached an indicated altitude of 4,500 ft. At that point, it was about 5 nautical miles (nm) offshore, which was about 8 nm from WVI. The airplane then began a turn to the west-northwest and climbed to a maximum altitude of 4,900 ft msl. It continued about 10 nm in that direction, during which it descended to an altitude of about 1,000 ft msl. The airplane then turned northwest and began to fly parallel to the coastline about 3 nm offshore. That track extended about 16 nm, and the latter portion was flown at altitudes that varied between 700 and 400 ft msl. The airplane turned to the west, then entered a left descending circle about 1 nm in diameter. The final radar return was recorded at 2102:18, near the completion of the circle.

That evening, a group of campers were at a campground about 30 miles west-northwest of WVI, about 1 mile inland from and with a direct view of the Pacific Ocean. They reported that, about 2100, while facing approximately west, they observed a "blinking white and green light," which they perceived to be a helicopter, flying roughly northbound over the ocean. They then saw it descend "straight down" to the water and observed a "large splash." They reported the event to local law enforcement, and two San Mateo County Sheriff's Office (SMCSO) officers responded to the campsite within the hour. The SMCSO communicated with the United States Coast Guard (USCG) and other agencies that evening and determined that no aircraft had been reported as being in distress or missing. About 2300, the USCG advised SMCSO that the "circumstances did not meet the criteria to initiate a search," and that the USCG would not be responding to the event.

The following day, a Santa Cruz Flying Club (SCFC) pilot who had scheduled the accident airplane for that day discovered that the airplane was not in its tiedown location and could not be located at the airport. SCFC used a self-dispatch system for its pilots and airplanes. Follow-up investigation by the SCFC president was unable to account for the airplane and one of the SCFC member pilots. The next day, the SCFC president notified the Watsonville Police Department and WVI management that the airplane was missing. Review of WVI surveillance video depicted an airplane similar in appearance to the accident airplane taxiing across a ramp at nightfall on June 26. The airplane registration number was not discernible in the image, and no further images of that airplane were captured. The SCFC president reported that this operation of the airplane was not scheduled or authorized.

The last radar return was located about 31 nm northwest of WVI, about 3.2 miles off the California coast at a transponder-indicated altitude of 0 ft and about 3.8 miles southwest of the land-based eyewitnesses. In response to the radar data findings, additional land and ocean searches were conducted on June 29 and 30. The USCG conducted a search in the region of the final radar return. No wreckage or other indications of the airplane were observed. A ramp check of Half Moon Bay Airport (HAF), Half Moon Bay, California, the next-closest airport to the final radar return, did not locate the airplane. A search of WVI located the pilot's vehicle with his mobile telephone inside. Law enforcement personnel did not locate the pilot at his residence, and communications with the pilot's next-of-kin also failed to locate him.

## Pilot Information

<b>Certificate:</b>	Private	<b>Age:</b>	63, Male
<b>Airplane Rating(s):</b>	Single-engine land	<b>Seat Occupied:</b>	Unknown
<b>Other Aircraft Rating(s):</b>	None	<b>Restraint Used:</b>	Unknown
<b>Instrument Rating(s):</b>	None	<b>Second Pilot Present:</b>	
<b>Instructor Rating(s):</b>	None	<b>Toxicology Performed:</b>	No
<b>Medical Certification:</b>	Class 3 With waivers/limitations	<b>Last FAA Medical Exam:</b>	November 9, 2018
<b>Occupational Pilot:</b>	No	<b>Last Flight Review or Equivalent:</b>	
<b>Flight Time:</b>	300 hours (Total, all aircraft)		

The pilot's personal flight records were not recovered.

The SCFC president reported that the pilot's most recent flight review was completed on July 10, 2017, and that the pilot then flew solo twice in SCFC airplanes, in July and October of 2017. The October 2017 flight was the pilot's last contact with SCFC until he returned in May 2019 in order to regain his flight currency. The pilot flew an SCFC airplane with an SCFC flight instructor twice, on May 29 and June 7, 2019. The instructor did not sign the pilot off to fly SCFC airplanes solo, and the pilot had scheduled several more sessions with SCFC airplanes. However, he did not conduct any additional flights in SCFC airplanes until the accident flight.

In his written statement to the NTSB, the instructor who flew with the pilot in 2019 did not cite any concerns about the pilot's behavior or attitude.

According to his FAA medical certificate applications, the pilot had at least three prior convictions for driving under the influence of alcohol, but was granted an eligibility letter to obtain an FAA medical certificate by the FAA Aerospace Medical Certification Division (AMCD) in June 2004; the letter required the continued abstinence from alcohol. The pilot had a family history of bipolar disease and major depression. In 2007, the AMCD determined that the pilot had no substance abuse or dependence, but he was found by AMCD to have "Adjustment Disorders with Depressed Mood." AMCD granted an eligibility letter on 05/24/2007, but that issuance did not require any FAA follow-up action with or by the pilot.

## Aircraft and Owner/Operator Information

<b>Aircraft Make:</b>	Cessna	<b>Registration:</b>	N3504A
<b>Model/Series:</b>	172 S	<b>Aircraft Category:</b>	Airplane
<b>Year of Manufacture:</b>	2005	<b>Amateur Built:</b>	No
<b>Airworthiness Certificate:</b>	Normal	<b>Serial Number:</b>	172S8857
<b>Landing Gear Type:</b>	Tricycle	<b>Seats:</b>	4
<b>Date/Type of Last Inspection:</b>	January 24, 2019 Annual	<b>Certified Max Gross Wt.:</b>	2299 lbs
<b>Time Since Last Inspection:</b>		<b>Engines:</b>	1 Reciprocating
<b>Airframe Total Time:</b>	6275 Hrs at time of accident	<b>Engine Manufacturer:</b>	Lycoming
<b>ELT:</b>	Installed	<b>Engine Model/Series:</b>	IO360
<b>Registered Owner:</b>		<b>Rated Power:</b>	
<b>Operator:</b>		<b>Operating Certificate(s) Held:</b>	None

## Meteorological Information and Flight Plan

<b>Conditions at Accident Site:</b>	Unknown	<b>Condition of Light:</b>	Dusk
<b>Observation Facility, Elevation:</b>	WVI, 163 ft msl	<b>Distance from Accident Site:</b>	31 Nautical Miles
<b>Observation Time:</b>	20:35 Local	<b>Direction from Accident Site:</b>	135°
<b>Lowest Cloud Condition:</b>	Unknown	<b>Visibility:</b>	10 miles
<b>Lowest Ceiling:</b>	Unknown	<b>Visibility (RVR):</b>	
<b>Wind Speed/Gusts:</b>	/	<b>Turbulence Type Forecast/Actual:</b>	/
<b>Wind Direction:</b>		<b>Turbulence Severity Forecast/Actual:</b>	/
<b>Altimeter Setting:</b>		<b>Temperature/Dew Point:</b>	
<b>Precipitation and Obscuration:</b>	No Obscuration; No Precipitation		
<b>Departure Point:</b>	Pescadero, CA	<b>Type of Flight Plan Filed:</b>	None
<b>Destination:</b>		<b>Type of Clearance:</b>	None
<b>Departure Time:</b>	20:35 Local	<b>Type of Airspace:</b>	Unknown

The 2100 WVI automated weather observation included wind from 320° at 8 knots, visibility 10 miles, an overcast ceiling at 700 ft agl, temperature 14°C, dew point 13°C, and an altimeter setting of 30.06 inches of mercury.

Local sunset occurred at 2030, and twilight ended at 2101.

## Wreckage and Impact Information

<b>Crew Injuries:</b>	1 Fatal	<b>Aircraft Damage:</b>	Destroyed
<b>Passenger Injuries:</b>		<b>Aircraft Fire:</b>	Unknown
<b>Ground Injuries:</b>	N/A	<b>Aircraft Explosion:</b>	Unknown
<b>Total Injuries:</b>	1 Fatal	<b>Latitude, Longitude:</b>	37.113334,-122.408058(est)

## Communications

The WVI common traffic advisory frequency (CTAF) that was used for pilot self-reporting communications was not recorded by the airport. A review of a commercially available recording of the WVI CTAF for the relevant time period did not reveal any communications from any aircraft identified as N3504A. There were no known communications between the missing airplane and any air traffic control facilities during the accident flight.

## Administrative Information

<b>Investigator In Charge (IIC):</b>	Huhn, Michael
<b>Additional Participating Persons:</b>	
<b>Original Publish Date:</b>	August 25, 2020
<b>Note:</b>	The NTSB did not travel to the scene of this accident.
<b>Investigation Docket:</b>	<a href="https://data.nts.gov/Docket?ProjectID=99762">https://data.nts.gov/Docket?ProjectID=99762</a>

The National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB), established in 1967, is an independent federal agency mandated by Congress through the Independent Safety Board Act of 1974 to investigate transportation accidents, determine the probable causes of the accidents, issue safety recommendations, study transportation safety issues, and evaluate the safety effectiveness of government agencies involved in transportation. The NTSB makes public its actions and decisions through accident reports, safety studies, special investigation reports, safety recommendations, and statistical reviews.

The Independent Safety Board Act, as codified at 49 U.S.C. Section 1154(b), precludes the admission into evidence or use of any part of an NTSB report related to an incident or accident in a civil action for damages resulting from a matter mentioned in the report. A factual report that may be admissible under 49 U.S.C. § 1154(b) is available [here](#).