Lessons from the Ashes: Improving Aviation Safety through Accident Investigation

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NTSB Executive Officer

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2017 Activity

ALJ Office
- 237 new cases received
- 33 hearings
- 44 ALJ decisions
  - 121 emergency cases

Decisions Appealed to the Board
- Issued 17 Opinion & Orders
  - 12 affirmed
  - 0 reversed
  - 2 modified
  - 3 remanded
Office of Aviation Safety - 2017

- 1298 domestic accidents investigated
- Accredited Representative to 164 foreign accident investigations
Lockhart, TX
July 2016
Passenger smartphone photos

You see our shadow
Pilot History

- Multiple arrests, convictions, and imprisonment for drugs possession and distribution, and driving while impaired.
- Diagnosed with “major depression”
- ADHD
Pilot’s Medications

• Prescribed 13 medications
  Many likely not impairing

• Toxicology: 5 likely impairing medications
  Three prescription
    Cyclobenzaprine, diazepam, oxycodone
  Two over-the-counter
    Dextromethorphan, diphenhydramine
These air tour operations ... require this.

FAA Medical Certificate
But, for commercial air tour balloon operations…
Probable Cause

The pilot’s pattern of poor decision-making that led to the initial launch, continued flight in fog and above clouds, and descent near or through clouds that decreased the pilot’s ability to see and avoid obstacles.

Contributing to the accident were:

(1) the pilot’s impairing medical conditions and medications, and;

(2) the Federal Aviation Administration’s policy to not require a medical certificate for commercial balloon pilots.
NTSB recommendations to FAA:

- Require medical certificates for commercial balloon operators
- Better surveillance and oversight for commercial balloon operators
National Transportation Safety Board

Urgent Safety Recommendation Report

Additional Harness Systems that Allow for Rapid Egress

Accident Number: ER61A0439
Operator: Liberty Helicopters, Inc.
Accident date: March 19, 2019
Location: Hickory, NC

The National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) is providing the following information to alert the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) to take appropriate action in light of the safety recommendations contained herein. The NTSB determines that a reasonable basis exists for the issue of an emergency safety recommendation when an accident or an occurrence indicates a potential hazardous situation which, if not corrected, could result in serious accident.