

June 5, 2010 - Custer Crash

One of the last things that any pilot wants to hear of is a plane crash. When I was still young and had just begun flying, my father would always send me a newspaper clipping of any flying accident that he would run across, no matter where or when it had occurred. I guess his thought process was that it would make me think, and thus become a better pilot. Today, I had a chance to think, and perhaps become a better pilot.

I had just begun my "job" at the Custer County, SD airport and had a chance to greet and talk to a pilot whose airplane had been in for maintenance. He was waiting for the the plane wash to be completed, after which he was then going to make a couple of "touch and go" landings on the field, before departing to his home airport of Rapid City, some 30 miles to the north. I watched as he took off, and heard him call in on the radio announcing his turning final for his first landing. I never heard from him afterward, despite another airplane calling in for airport information. After about 30 minutes I went over to the maintenance hanger, next door, and inquired of the mechanic if he had seen the airplane, a really nice Cessna Super Skymaster, push/pull twin engine craft. "No" was his response and he thought that strange, since the pilot indicated that he would be doing a couple of take-off and landings at our field.

Since I was brand new on the job, I decided to gain guidance from my boss, the airport manager, and placed a phone call to him. He suggested that I wait another 30 minutes, before calling the plane owners home airport to see if he had decided to head back there instead. Another 10 minutes passed and I decided to take my own plane up and scout around the area, since my radio calls to the wayward Cessna still went unanswered. I was hardly airborne when the mechanic called on the radio announcing that the pilot had just called in by cell phone announcing that he had "crash landed" just a couple miles west of our field when his rear engine suddenly stopped. Despite being a twin, the density altitude of over 7,500 feet at our field elevation probably exceeded his single engine performance, and did not allow him to maintain altitude. Just about that time I spotted his airplane in the cow pasture, and circled the location to allow the mechanic, who was now enroute with his car, to better find the downed plane's location.

Bottom line, the pilot was unhurt, but the plane was substantially damaged and would need to be hoisted out of the field on a flat bed truck and be brought in for insurance company evaluation and possible repair. The pilot did an admirable job in bringing in his crippled aircraft onto a rough and hilly cow pasture only a thousand or so feet in length. The old saying that any landing that you can walk away from is as good landing certainly applied in this instance. The lesson learned is to try to be ready for any eventuality. Always have a spot pre-picked just in case the unthinkable happens and that engine suddenly decides to quit. While this is beautiful country, the high hills and its adjoining mountains can be quite inhospitable to emergency landings. Just like the Boy Scouts motto says, always try to be prepared.

So far no reason why that rear engine failed but the FAA investigation has only just begun.



The red circle marks the downed Cessna



We can see the unhurt pilot & Hwy. Patrol



Major damage to the planes under-carriage



Removal was via crain & flat-bed trailer