

Aircraft: Reims-Cessna F-172H F-BOGB

Year of Manufacture:

Date and time (GMT): 21 April 1982 at 1837 hrs

Location: Undetermined - probably in the Channel south west of the Isle of Wight

Type of flight: Private (pleasure)

Persons on board: Crew - 1 Passengers - 3

Injuries: Crew - 1 Passengers - 3  
(believed fatal) (believed fatal)

Nature of damage: Probably destroyed

Commander's Licence: French Private Pilot's Licence

Commander's Age:

Commander's total flying experience: 1500 hours (the hours on type are not at present known)

The aircraft was on a flight from Cherbourg (Maupertus), to Southampton. Earlier that day the pilot had refuelled with 55 litres of fuel, and to what is believed to have been full tanks. The aircraft took off from its base at Lognes (Emerainville) to the east of Paris at 1441 hrs, and flew to Meaux (Esbly) where it landed at 1449 hrs, and three life-jackets were taken on board. The aircraft took off from Meaux en route for Caen at 1504 hrs, and was subsequently advised by Caen ATC that outbound customs clearance would not be available there. The pilot decided to divert towards Deauville and asked Caen ATC whether Cherbourg could take him. Cherbourg affirmed that customs would be available until 1800 hrs, and the pilot decided to continue to Cherbourg, his ETA for which was 1710 hrs. The pilot also filed a VFR flight plan from Cherbourg to Southampton with Caen which contained the information that there were four on board, and that the endurance would be 8 hours after refuelling. The pilot then amended this endurance figure to 4 hours. The estimated flight time to Southampton was 40 minutes. The flight plan was relayed to Cherbourg with the additional note that the aircraft required refuelling there. The Cherbourg controller telephoned Caen to advise that refuelling was not available at that time of the day. This information was passed to the pilot, who decided to continue to Cherbourg, and revised his onward flight plan endurance to 2 hours. The aircraft landed at Cherbourg at 1708 hrs and the occupants completed the outbound customs formalities. The pilot also visited the control tower and enquired about the Southampton hours of operation, and the Southampton and London FIS RTF frequencies. He also enquired about the cross channel weather, and was referred to the Met Office. At 1804 hrs the aircraft took off on a VFR flight to Southampton and after 2 or 3 minutes, was handed over to Brest Information. There were no reported abnormalities to this departure.

The first recorded RTF contact with a UK ATC centre, was an initial call to Bournemouth from F-BOGB at 1820 hrs. Hurn Approach replied 'READING YOU FIVES', but there was no response from the aircraft until 1825 hrs when the pilot transmitted another initial call to Bournemouth. Hurn Approach again acknowledged with 'READABILITY FIVE', and 30 seconds later invited the aircraft to 'GO AHEAD', but there was no reply. At 1831 the pilot broadcast a Mayday distress call and message on 121.5 MHz in French. After the initial distress call and callsign, the message went on to announce 'WE HAVE GOT A FAILURE, WE ARE 10 MINUTES FROM THE COAST ON RADIAL 180 AND 10 MINUTES FROM THE COAST. WE ARE AT THE END OF OUR FUEL RESERVES'. At 1832 hrs Drayton Centre replied, offering assistance, and the pilot repeated 'PANNE DE MOTEUR' (engine failure) twice. Drayton Centre then requested the flight details and after a broken transmission, a female voice replied 'WE ARE SHORT OF PETROL'. Drayton Centre tried to establish the position of the aircraft, and after replying that his altitude was 2500 feet, the pilot reported that his position was '070 VOR ER VOR 'CENT' ONE ONE FOUR FOUR DECIMAL FOUR'. After some confusion, and the interpretive assistance of a female passenger, it was established that the aircraft's destination was Bournemouth, that the aircraft was over the English Channel, and that there were four on board. The heading at 1835 hrs was reported as 'TWO ZERO'. Drayton Centre also determined that the aircraft was not transponder equipped, and that the pilot had no clear idea of his range and bearing from Hurn. The female voice reported 'WE CAN SEE THE COAST NOW' at 1836 hrs. At 1837 hrs she transmitted 'WE ARE GOING INTO THE WATER NOW' and there was no further contact with the aircraft.

At 1838 hrs Drayton Centre attempted to scramble the Portland SAR helicopter, but this was not immediately available. A helicopter from Lee on Solent was scrambled at 1845 hrs, to be joined later by 2 Lynx helicopters from Yeovilton, a Sea King from Portland, a Sea Harrier and a number of civil aircraft. The Weymouth lifeboat, which had been launched at approximately 1900 hrs, conducted a sea-search in company with a number of other vessels. The search was temporarily abandoned at 2359 hrs on 21 April 1982 until first light at 0430 hrs the following day. The first Wessex helicopter was airborne from Portland at 0434 hrs, and the Yarmouth lifeboat was reported at sea by 0410 hrs. The search continued throughout the day, without success, and was terminated at 1809 hrs.

The weather at the time of the accident was generally fair, with a light northwesterly wind, lowest cloud, scattered at 2500 feet, and visibility 5-10 km but 3000-4000 metres over the sea. Height of the 0°C isotherm was 8500 feet, with a shallow sub-freezing layer between 5000 and 6000 feet.

Up to this time no trace of the aircraft or its occupants had been found.