

Aircraft type and registration: Piper PA 24—260 G-ATIA (light single engined fixed wing aircraft)

Year of Manufacture: 1964

Date and time (GMT): 21 August 1985 at 2015 hrs

Location: Sywell Aerodrome, Northampton

Type of flight: Private (pleasure)

Persons on board: Crew — 1 Passengers — 2

Injuries: Crew — None Passengers — None

Nature of damage: Minor damage to fuselage undersurface, propeller damaged, and engine shock-loaded

Commander's Licence: Senior Commercial Pilot's Licence

Commander's Age: 25 years

Commander's Total Flying Experience: 3620 hours (of which 39 were on type)

Information Source: Aircraft Accident Report Form submitted by the pilot, and AIB telephone enquiries.

The aircraft was on a flight from Angers, France to Northampton (Sywell) via Luton. The pilot was authorised to use Sywell Aerodrome outside normal operating hours as an unlicensed aerodrome. Departure from Luton for the 35 nm trip to Sywell was at 1951 hrs, 36 minutes after the published sunset time for Sywell.

The Luton weather observation at 1950 hrs included a surface wind of 09 kt from 220°N, visibility 7000 m, and 5 oktas of cloud at 2000 feet, with continuous light rain.

The pilot reported that by the time he found that Sywell Air Traffic Service was unmanned he was almost overhead the aerodrome. At this point he noted that the engine oil pressure gauge was reading zero and therefore decided to make a precautionary landing on the aerodrome.

A witness on the ground reported that when the aircraft arrived in the vicinity of the aerodrome at around 2010 hrs the weather was overcast with drizzle and very dark. He could just see the outline of trees against the sky and he saw the aircraft's lights, but was unable to make out its outline. Wind was estimated at 250/10—15 kt.

The aircraft made an approach to Runway 07 (700 × 18 m), an unlit grass runway. The approach was fast and a go-round was initiated, during which the aircraft touched down and ran for about 30 m through a field of mature wheat before becoming airborne again. It was seen to bank hard to avoid trees before sinking behind them and reportedly narrowly missing a farmhouse.

The aircraft orbited while two cars were positioned at the Runway 25 threshold with headlights on, and a second landing attempt was made, this time on Runway 33 (528 × 18 m). The main runway at Sywell is 03/21 (909 × 30 m). The pilot reported that although the landing gear green

annunciator light came on when he selected landing gear down for this second attempt, it extinguished as the aircraft touched down and the red gear-unsafe light came on. The aircraft touched down near the landing threshold, slid for approximately 300 m and came to rest a few yards from the end of the runway. Neither the pilot nor two passengers were injured.

Damage to the aircraft indicated that the landing gears were fully retracted at the time of touchdown. Following aircraft repair the landing gear was cycled and the engine run. No evidence was found of any defect that could have caused the oil pressure gauge to read zero or the landing gear annunciator lights to indicate falsely.