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DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE
BUREAU OF AIR COMMERCE
Washington

REPORT OF THE ACCIDENT BOARD
BUREAU OF AIR COMMERCE

Statement of probable cause concerning an accident which occurred to an airplane of Western Air Express Corporation on September 1, 1935 near Burbank, California

To the Director of Air Commerce

On September 1, 1935 at approximately 11:07 p.m. near Burbank, California, an aircraft of United States registry, piloted by licensed airmen, while being flown in scheduled interstate operation carrying a crew of three and United States mail, crashed with resultant death to the crew and the complete destruction of the aircraft and cargo.

The aircraft, a Boeing, model 247-D, had been regularly inspected by the Department of Commerce on April 28, 1935 and bore Department of Commerce license number NC-13314. It was owned by the Western Air Express Corporation and was being operated between San Diego, California, and Salt Lake City, Utah, by the corporation. The pilot, George C. Sherwood, held the necessary Department of Commerce transport pilot's license and scheduled air transport rating. He had satisfactorily passed his physical examination for renewal of his license on July 2, 1935. The co-pilot, E. N. Burlew, held a Department of Commerce transport pilot's license. The stewardess was Miss Donna Naylor. No passengers were on board.

At the time of departure the ceiling at Burbank was 300 feet with a visibility of two miles. This flight, scheduled as Trip 6, was cleared from Burbank at 11:00 p.m. carrying crew and mail only. Passengers were to be taken on board at Saugus, California, where more favorable weather prevailed. From Saugus, the flight was to proceed to Salt Lake City.

The take-off was normal in every respect. The airplane entered the overcast at an altitude of about 300 feet and from the sound of the engines it was apparent that it made a climbing turn in the overcast to an estimated altitude of about 1,000 feet. It was next heard diving through the overcast at an excessive speed and it was seen to emerge from the overcast, pull up abruptly and disappear back into the overcast still under full power. Practically the same gyration was completed a second time and as the airplane was heard descending a third time, the engines were suddenly silent as if the throttles had been closed. After an appreciable time following the shutting off of the engines, the sound of the crash was heard. The airplane first struck the ground, then a high tension line. Fire followed striking the ground.

An examination of the wreckage indicated that all controls were free and had been connected and that the undercarriage was in full retracted position. The instruments were completely destroyed through fire and impact and, therefore, could not be checked. However, the pilots who had previously flown this airplane reported that all instruments and controls were functioning normally and that this airplane was particularly nice to fly.

The pilot had flown 5,000 hours for this company, 3,000 hours of which were in the capacity of first pilot. He reported for duty more than 1/2 hour ahead of schedule and his physical condition appeared normal in every respect. Prior to his take-off, he was observed to test out both engines separately and to maneuver the airplane from side to side, as is done in checking navigation instruments. His radio receiver and transmitter were also checked at this time and found satisfactory.

Several theories have been suggested as the probable cause of this accident. However, to date, no direct evidence has been uncovered which will substantiate any of them.

It is the opinion of the Accident Board that the probable cause of this accident was failure of the pilot to maintain proper control of the aircraft while climbing through fog.

ACCIDENT BOARD

/s/ Jesse W. Lankford
Secretary

Signed:

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