

REPORT OF THE CIVIL AERONAUTICS BOARD
on the
Investigation of an Accident Involving Aircraft
During a Local Practice Flight

James Otto Watts was fatally injured in an accident which occurred approximately 2 miles northwest of the Municipal Airport, Minot, North Dakota, about 8:20 a.m. on October 9, 1943. Watts was a War Training Service Navy trainee and had flown 19½ dual and 8 solo hours. The aircraft, a Piper J3C-65, NC 25762, owned by Charles H. Westlie, was demolished.

Watts took off from a temporary field immediately adjacent to Minot Airport at approximately 7:15 a.m. on a local practice flight. Although the sky was clear and visibility unlimited, a low line of clouds along the eastern horizon prompted his instructor to warn him to return to the field if weather conditions became unfavorable. Between 7:30 a.m. and 8:00 a.m. this cloud bank moved in and settled over the airport and surrounding terrain, forming a low, ragged ceiling from 100 to 600 feet above the ground and greatly reducing visibility. Watts' aircraft was observed by another trainee to approach an auxiliary field 7 miles northwest of Minot Airport, but without landing, it departed in a southeasterly direction toward Minot Airport. Shortly after 8:00 a.m., when all but four solo students had returned to the airport, several instructors started a ground search for the missing airplanes. During the search Watts' plane was found in a completely demolished condition in a field about 2 miles northwest of the airport.

Examination of the wreckage and marks on the ground indicated that the airplane had crashed at a fairly steep angle on the left wing tip while headed downwind at a high speed. The force of impact severed the left wing from the fuselage and the plane slid forward 44 feet on the left side of the fuselage. There was no evidence of failure of any part of the aircraft prior to the accident and the manner in which the propeller was broken indicated that considerable power was being developed at the time of impact. Watts' plane was last seen passing over the auxiliary field and since the accident occurred at a point almost in a direct line between that field and the Minot Airport, it appears that the pilot was probably attempting to reach this airport when visibility became so poor that visual contact with the ground was lost.

Instructors and students were agreed that no one anticipated adverse flying weather when the day's flying activities began about 7:10 a.m. Nevertheless, between 8:00 and 8:20 a.m. pilots reported that they were forced to land because of the rapidly lowering ceiling. The forecast covering the period between 4:30 a.m. and 12:30 p.m. was, "Ceiling unlimited, high scattered clouds, and northeast 10 m.p.h., smoky, top of smoke 5000 feet above sea level." The 7:30 a.m. forecast, which was received after Watts took off, did not indicate the weather change that occurred and it appears doubtful that the instructor had sufficient warning to cause him to be unduly concerned at the time of releasing Student Watts for this flight. Therefore, it is believed that, under the circumstances, the instructor's judgment was as good as could have been expected.

This accident was due to the inexperienced pilot's loss of control of the aircraft while flying in local weather conditions of little or no visibility.

BY THE BOARD

/s/ Fred A. Toombs
Secretary