

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

Pilot Herman Claud Balderson and his passenger, Mabel Irene Conley, were fatally injured in an aircraft which crashed in the Rappahannock River approximately 12 miles below Tappahannock, Virginia, about 11:00 a.m. on November 20, 1943. Balderson, age 22, formerly held a student pilot certificate which had expired. His solo flight time was estimated to have been between 150 and 200 hours. Miss Conley, age 20, was not certificated as a pilot. The aircraft, a Piper J3L, NC 27929, owned by the pilot, was demolished.

Investigation disclosed that the subject aircraft had been disassembled and stored in the pilot's hangar throughout 1942 and 1943, due to the fact that the area was within an active defense zone. The pilot's father stated that his son and Miss Conley had assembled the plane on November 13, 1943. A suicide agreement, dated October 31, 1943, and signed jointly by the pilot and his passenger, was found in the pilot's jacket pocket, and indicated their intention of "ending our troubles in the Rappahannock River."

Pilot Balderson and Miss Conley, having previously entered into the suicide pact, drove to the pilot's private hangar on his father's farm approximately 2 miles north of Tarsaw, Virginia, and took off from a sodded field adjacent to the hangar about 8:00 a.m. During the next three hours witnesses observed the plane flying low in the vicinity of the Rappahannock River, circling the homes of relatives and friends of the pilot and passenger. Shortly before 11:00 a.m. the pilot circled one of these homes at a low altitude and letters were dropped from the plane. The pilot then climbed to an altitude of approximately 2000 feet and put the plane into a steep dive. It crashed into the Rappahannock River and immediately sank in about 35 feet of water.

This crash and the resultant fatalities were due to deliberate action in carrying out the suicide pact.

BY THE BOARD

/s/ Fred A. Toombs
Secretary