

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

KC-135R, S/N 62-3500
AIRCRAFT ACCIDENT INVESTIGATION (AIB)
128th Air Refueling Wing, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, Air National Guard
15 May 2005

On 15 May 2005, at approximately 1500 local eastern standard time (1900 Zulu), a KC-135R, S/N 62-3500, encountered unforecasted severe clear air turbulence at approximately 37,000 feet, while over the Caribbean Sea. The KC-135R, assigned to the Wisconsin Air National Guard, 128th Air Refueling Wing, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, was providing airlift for the St. Thomas Army National Guard. The KC-135R took-off from Jacksonville Naval Air Station and was scheduled to land at Cyril E. King Airport, St. Thomas, U.S. Virgin Islands. In addition to seven crewmembers, there were 40 Army National Guard members and one retired Navy passenger onboard.

The forecasted weather for the flight called for light turbulence. Light turbulence is defined as slight erratic changes in attitude or altitude caused by slight variations in airspeed. There were no indications the aircraft would encounter weather that would cause a sudden drop. After reaching cruising altitude and level flight, passengers were allowed to move about the rear of the aircraft. Several passengers unbuckled and stretched out on the aircraft floor, while others remained loosely or tightly strapped in their seat. The pilots were seated with their seatbelts fastened. Immediately prior to the incident, the right seat pilot identified a high cirrus cloud and told the crew it might get a little bumpy, however, the cloud was not the type associated with severe turbulence. Seconds later, before the crew was able to inform the passengers the aircraft dropped 400 feet. The sudden change in altitude resulted in passengers being thrown to the ceiling and then to the floor once the aircraft stopped falling. Two passengers sustained serious head and neck injuries, while other passengers and crewmembers sustained minor bumps and bruises. Due to injuries, an in-flight emergency was declared and the aircraft diverted to the Turks and Caicos Islands.

After the incident, the aircraft continued normal flight. The aircraft exceeded a negative "G" force limitation resulting in the grounding of the aircraft upon landing. The aircraft sustained no visible external damage. Minor internal damage to the aircraft consisted of dents to the fuel vent tube and air duct. Seventeen days after the incident, an Army Guardsman, onboard the aircraft at the time of the incident, suddenly and unexpectedly died. The *St. Thomas Source* newspaper potentially connected the death to the incident, however, it was later determined the two were unrelated. Before, during and after the incident there were no mechanical or electrical problems with the aircraft to cause the accident. The AIB President found by clear and convincing evidence the cause of the accident was unforeseen, unforecasted, and unavoidable clear air turbulence. There were no other causes or contributing factors to the accident.

Under 10 U.S.C. 2254(d), any opinion of the accident investigators as to the cause of, or the factors contributing to, the accident set forth in the accident investigation report may not be considered as evidence in any civil or criminal proceeding arising from an aircraft accident, nor may such information be considered an admission of liability by the United States or by any person referred to in those conclusions or statements.

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