Mysteries of Aviation – Beech Aircraft Corporation E55 VH-WMD

Author: W Dearing December 2020

The pilot owned a property at Killiecranckie on Flinders Island and had landed his aircraft on several occasions at the Killiecrankie airstrip but as far as can be determined he had never landed at Killiecrankie at night.

On the afternoon of April 21, 1996, the pilot submitted an IFR flight plan in VH-WMD for a flight from Bankstown to Killiecrankie. The plan showed the flight would proceed to Flinders Island under IFR procedures thence to Killiecrankie under Night VMC Rules coastal at 1000 feet.

A Beech Aircraft Corporation E55 similar to that of VH-WMD

The aircraft was fitted with two ADF's, two VOR's, a Trimble TNL 2000 GPS and an ELT emergency beacon.

The planned flight time was 154 minutes and the aircraft's total fuel endurance was shown as 330 minutes.

Prior to departure the pilot obtained NOTAMS and met forecasts. The amended Flinders Island terminal forecast predicted 2 octas of stratus cloud at 2500 feet and 6 octas of altocumulus at 12,000 feet. The forecast also predicted intermittent periods between 5pm and 9 pm local time when the visibility would be 6,000 metres in rain showers with 5 octas of stratus at 1200 feet.

Departure airport Bankstown NSW

The aircraft departed Bankstown at 1732 with the pilot giving normal position reports enroute. At 1950 the pilot advised Melbourne Centre that his position was 25NM from Killiecrankie. At 1957 he contacted the crew of another aircraft about to land at Flinders Island, stating WMD was 20NM north of Flinders Island, in cloud, leaving 5,000ft and proceeding to Killiecrankie, at the northern end of the island. The pilot of WMD then told the other aircraft crew that if he was not visual at Flinders Island, he would conduct an instrument letdown to circling height and then proceed night VFR north.

In response to a request from Melbourne Centre at 1957, the pilot said he would make an operations-normal call by 2020. At 2000 the pilot stated he was not visual and would make another ops-normal call at 2045. No other calls were received from the pilot. Melbourne Centre commenced calling WMD at 2045. These calls were continued and checks were made with a person living near Killiecrankie airstrip. This person advised he had seen a sustained flash of light at about 2030, towards the north. The distress phase of search-and-rescue procedures was declared at 2100 and search action commenced.

An air search was continued until the evening of the 24 April 1996. During this time, a few pieces of wreckage were found either on or close to the north-western shore of the island, mainly between Killiecrankie and Stanley Point. Police continued a ground search for several more days. The main wreckage was not found.

The items of aircraft wreckage found included one front seat, a sun visor, lining from the roof, and a front seat belt. Inspection of these items established they were from a Beech Baron aircraft but definite identification of the registration of the aircraft they were fitted to could not be determined.

The pilot of an aircraft which landed at Flinders Island at the time WMD was in the vicinity, reported there were 3-4 octas of cloud at 2000 feet. He also reported that it was not raining.

Witnesses indicated that it was a very dark night. The moon had set at 1951, which was 30 minutes before the last call received from the pilot. The phase of the moon was such that prior to moonset only a small portion of the moon surface was illuminated. (13 percent).

Since obtaining his licence in 1967, the pilot had been the subject of many air safety incident reports. As a result, he was required on occasions to undergo flight tests. He failed several of these tests, but later past re-tests. He currently held a command instrument rating which was valid until January 1997.

The strip at Killiecrankie was equipped with a set of runway lights that could be activated by a series of coded radio transmissions from an aircraft VHF radio. The lights were capable of normal operation. When turned on, the lights remained on for approximately 30 minutes. The lights were not activated at or after the time of which the flash of light was seen.

Killiecrankie airstrip Flinders Island, the proposed destination of VH-WMD. The airstrip is 1300 metres in length, sandy based and is aligned 09/27. It has no navigational aids.

The few pieces of wreckage found could not be positively identified as coming from WMD. However, they were from a Beech Baron type aircraft and it is considered that they were from WMD. The damage to the pieces found indicate the aircraft had been subjected to significant impact forces. Their general location indicated the main wreckage is probably in the sea near the north west coast of Flinders Island.

The actual flight path the pilot intended to follow after leaving Flinders Island is uncertain. The direct line distance from Flinders Island to Killiecrankie airstrip is about 16 NM. On the flight plan the pilot indicated the distance as 48 NM, the expected ground speed as 165 knots and planned time interval of 18 minutes three times longer than for a direct track to Killiecrankie.

A further anomaly in the pilot's flight planning is that he indicated he was proceeding coastal, night VFR, at 1000 feet. The general interpretation of coastal is that it indicates the intention to fly along or close to the coast, commonly within 1km. The pilot could not have done this at 1000 feet without operating below the lowest safe altitude.

The very dark conditions would have made it almost impossible to navigate by visual reference to the ground. Also, the dark conditions would have made flying by reference to external visual clues relatively difficult and in turn would have created orientation problems for the pilot.

Even so, in the absence of direct evidence, the reason for the aircraft not reaching the intended destination is unknown.