

Rapid Lesson Sharing

Event Type: Wing Tip Strike

Date: Nov. 30, 2016

Location: Tri-Cities Regional Airport
Blountsville, Tennessee

This account is for accident prevention only and cannot be used for accountability disposition or pecuniary liability. All information was gathered from interviews, site visits, and oral and written statements.

While this event is not a reportable accident or incident because there was no intent to fly or any movement—the aircraft was parked and was simply taxied into by another unrelated and unassociated aircraft—it provides a good opportunity to use as a learning event.



Photo shows some of the damage that occurred to the underside port wing of Tanker 41.

Background

When this incident occurred, air tankers and scoopers were successfully and effectively operating out of this airport. A Portable Air Tanker Base (PAB) had been set up on the General Aviation (GA) ramp with the tankers and scoopers otherwise parking at the Fixed-Base Operator (FBO). (A Fixed-Base Operator is an organization granted the right by an airport to operate at the airport and provide aeronautical services such as fueling, hangaring, tie-down and parking, aircraft rental, aircraft maintenance, flight instruction, and similar services.)

The Portable Air Tanker Base operations were established with appropriate clearances to the General Aviation Ramp. The air tankers and scoopers were parking at the Fixed-Base Operator where it was positively controlled by them and their tenders—and this FBO routinely services multiple sizes and shapes of aircraft.

This Portable Air Tanker Base had an initial operations plan followed shortly by an updated and improved plan. Soon after this particular incident, it received a previously scheduled Quality Assurance Review which found no shortcomings.

NARRATIVE

At the Tri-Cities Regional Airport in Blountsville, Tennessee on the evening of Nov. 23, 2016, a corporate Gulfstream Jet (Gulf Stream 4) taxied between another private business jet (Lear Jet) and Tanker 41 (T41), resulting in the underside of the Gulfstream jet's left wing tip winglet striking the entire width of the underside port wing tip of Tanker 41—causing damage to the air tanker's left wing aileron, wing tip, camera shroud, and leading edge hot wing.



This image is orientated north. The FBO is the rectangular building, upper center, running almost north/south (indicated with blue arrow), with parking lot to right of it. To the west, running northwest/southeast, is where multiple aircraft were parked.

Tanker 41 was already parked for the evening with the flight crew at their temporary quarters for the night. The maintenance crew was still on station performing minor upkeep and clean-up on the aircraft. Some scooper (CL 415) personnel who were still in the area conducting tasks related to their aircraft operations witnessed the impact incident.

The FBO had a ground guide, with lighted wands, directing the Gulfstream jet into a parking spot south of the FBO, rather than to the southwest where T41 and other aircraft, including the two CL 415s, were positioned in a line from the southwest extending to the northwest.

Reduced Light Conditions

The Gulfstream jet pilot chose to proceed around behind T41 and attempt to pull-up to park in the slot between the two aircraft.

While there was space between the two aircraft, there was most likely not enough to successfully judge sufficient clearance, especially in the reduced light conditions at that time of evening. The span did not meet Federal Aviation Regulation (FAR) Part 77 regarding obstruction criteria associated with taxi clearances. (The Gulfstream jet pilot voluntarily claimed fault verbally to T41 Pilot in Command (PIC) upon his quick return to the airport after notification.)

Relevant Facts and Statistics:

- ❖ The Gulfstream jet's wing span is 77 feet, 10 inches.
- ❖ The distance between T41 and the Lear Jet was 83 feet.
- ❖ Sunset was at 1716. The strike incident occurred at approximately 1730.
- ❖ The Gulfstream pilot was a seasoned corporate pilot with a considerable amount of flight experience.



- ❖ The Gulfstream pilot operated consistently out of this airport.
- ❖ The Gulfstream pilot did not follow the parking tender's directions.

LESSONS

Even though this is not an agency accident, we can still examine its cause for lessons in hopes of not duplicating a similar act with "Call When Needed" or vendor aircraft.

Complacency

After a thorough examination and exchange, all parties, including those involved, are in agreement with the conclusion that the cause in this instance falls into the category of "human error"—and more specifically, "complacency."

Why did the Gulfstream pilot not adhere to or comply with the parking tender's guidance, consciously or unconsciously (ignore, disregard or not comprehend/realize)? Why did he not perform a left 270-degree turn back around to park south of the FBO—where the attendant was trying to direct him—once he distinguished that there was not enough room?

Or, why did he not proceed farther and park at the open slot short of the first CL 415? Because they were not options in his mind at that moment? Why did he not recognize the space was too narrow?

We need to always be alert to complacency creeping into our psyche—especially with increased experience and expertise.

This pilot operated out of the same airport, parking in the same spot all, if not most, of the time. (It was his spot.) Had it all become extremely routine and repetitive to him—maybe even automated to some degree?

Complacency is probably the largest single threat to much of what we should guard against in aviation.

A couple of age-old aviation expressions provide sound guidance: *"You can never let your guard down."* *"You can never relax in aviation."*

Familiarity and local area knowledge is invaluable, right up until the point where it turns into complacency. We need to always be alert to complacency creeping into our psyche—especially with increased experience and expertise.

Other Considerations

Would, or could, the Ops plan possibly contribute to this event? In this case, it is not believed so. The Portable Air Tanker Base (PAB) layout and extended parking at the Fixed-Base Operator (FBO) are unrelated. This would be no different than the air tanker parked there on a stopover flight and getting taxied into.

One consideration that might help in this area is if the PABs were augmented with additional support equipment to accommodate the crews and support people—provided there is a large enough footprint to station it on. That is certainly something that could be looked into if the agency were to be in a position of new acquisitions. But at the same time, the agency would need to realize that this would tactically limit the airports that might have that kind of space. While established tanker bases do have those facilities, at this time, the PABs do not.

A Rare Occurrence

Were any base operational adjustments made directly after this event? This would include a greater situational awareness by individuals involved in ramp operations and the placement of high visibility cones at the four corners of the parked aircraft in FBO parking—that was already in practice for aircraft in the PAB proper itself.

It should be noted that such actions almost certainly would not have prevented this specific incident. The pilot was determined to go where he had already intended. This is regarded as the safest place to park out aircraft outside of an established U.S. Forest Service ramp, which, of course, was not present.

Unfortunately, this was simply a rare occurrence and not a case of where we set ourselves up for failure because of a lack of or poor design.



Were People in Danger?

Were the vendor maintenance people in any personal danger when this event took place? As it turns out, because this strike was not that violent, they were not.

But anybody in and around aircraft, operating or not, potentially can be in jeopardy. It is commonly agreed that maintenance folks try, if possible, not to work alone. But it should be realized that any of these companies or the agency may not always have the ability to post a “lookout” while work is performed. Furthermore, it would be improbable to restrict maintenance to only a hangar, if one was even available.

In fact, several people watched this incident occur. The parking tender tried to motion the pilot away from there. Using the “risk matrix,” the likelihood and severity of occurrence are both low, albeit somewhat subjective. The same family has owned that FBO since the 1960s. This was the first accident/incident for them.

The only other mitigation that comes to mind would be for the mechanic to stop and monitor as any aircraft taxied nearby. That did not get incorporated but is certainly a consideration and perhaps something to adopt.

Bottom Line: The idea of complacency deserves much more attention than it receives.

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