

Plane owner cited in death of skydivers

By Ted Gregory
TRIBUNE STAFF WRITER

A federal report released Thursday states that a 1992 plane crash in which 11 skydivers and a pilot were killed near Hinckley was caused by poor maintenance on the part of the skydiving business owner, a man whose two sons were killed in the crash.

The National Transportation Safety Board released its final report on the crash, which occurred Sept. 7, 1992, in a soybean field about 50 miles west of Chicago during a skydiving outing from the Hinckley Parachute Center.

"Inadequate maintenance and inspection by the operator which resulted in an engine power loss during the critical takeoff phase of the flight," was called the probable cause of the crash in the report.

James Baron, owner and operator of the parachute center, is not a Federal Aviation Administration-certified mechanic, but he installed the left engine and propeller on the plane in 1992, according to the NTSB. That engine change violated FAA regulations, the NTSB stated.

In addition, the twin-engine Beechcraft BE-18 had logged more than twice the flight hours permitted under FAA regulations before undergoing a thorough inspection, the NTSB said.

Baron's two sons, Chris, 27, of Naperville, and Ed, 29, of De Kalb, were killed in the fiery crash.

Witnesses told the NTSB that after the takeoff, the plane was trailing smoke from its left engine and that the wings were "tipping" back and forth, the report stated. The left wing dropped, striking the ground and throwing the aircraft into a cartwheel.

The plane reached an elevation of 400 feet, far below the level that would have allowed the skydivers to jump safely.

An earlier report noted that the engine, produced in 1942, sat unused outdoors at a Florida airport and at an Ohio skydiving club for nearly 18 years before James Baron bought it in 1991.

Baron was unavailable for comment Thursday but his attorney, Fred Morelli, said he was "somewhat surprised" at the report's conclusion.

Now that the final report has been completed, the FAA will decide what action to pursue, said NTSB spokesman Brent Bahler.

For Baron, that could mean maximum fines of \$10,000 per violation.

Several civil lawsuits filed by survivors of crash victims are pending in court.

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