

FRESNO-BASED AIR GUARD JET CRASHES

Fresno Bee, The (CA) - June 14, 1987

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A Fresno-based Air National Guard F-4D Phantom jet fighter-interceptor crashed Saturday while on a training mission near Tucson, Ariz., killing both the pilot and weapons system officer. Lt. Col. James A. Arthur, spokesman for the Fresno-based 144th Fighter- Interceptor Wing, said Saturday that the names of the two air crewmen were being withheld until next of kin could be notified. Arthur said there were no live armaments aboard the combat jet. The crash was the first fatal accident involving Fresno-based F-4D Phantoms. The Fresno-based 144th Fighter-Interceptor Wing began flying the 1966-model two-seat combat aircraft in 1984.

At Davis-Monthan Air Force Base near Tucson, a spokesman said the pilot had the rank of captain and the weapons systems officer, who sits in the rear cockpit, held the rank of major. He, too, declined to name the victims other than to confirm both were Fresno-based Air Guardsmen.

Maj. Gary Hawksworth, Davis-Monthan public affairs officer, said the plane crashed at 11:32 a.m. in "fairly open country" 25 miles southwest of Tucson and just north of the town of Arivaca. An Air Force accident investigation team arrived at the crash site Saturday afternoon. The causes of fatal Air Force and Air Guard crashes often aren't revealed until a month or more after the accident.

Hawksworth said the Fresno-based fliers arrived at Davis-Monthan Friday to participate in training exercises with Missouri Air National Guard C-130 Hercules four-engine tactical transport planes. He didn't know whether any other Fresno-based planes were involved in Saturday's training mission. Fresno-based Air Guard planes routinely participate with Air Guard units from other states and regular Air Force, Navy and Canadian Defense Forces planes in training exercises.

The crash was the first fatal accident involving Fresno Air Guard fliers since a T-33 jet trainer with only the pilot aboard left Fresno Air Terminal to be the target in an offshore intercept mission and mysteriously disappeared into the Pacific Ocean off Santa Maria on Sept. 15, 1983.

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- *Section: TELEGRAPH*
- *Page number: A1*
- *Record: 1987165004*
- *Index terms: FZ MILITARY AIRPLANE ACCIDENT DEATH*

AIR GUARD CRASH REMAINS PUZZLE

Fresno Bee, The (CA) - April 27, 1989

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Citing incomplete records and lack of cooperation from the U.S. Air Force, acting California Auditor General Kurt Sjoberg said Wednesday he could not determine whether the training, maintenance and safety rules were followed before a June 1987 crash that killed two members of the Fresno-based Air Guard. Although the investigation into the Fresno Air Guard's practices ended inconclusively, the matter is officially closed unless surviving family members pursue legal action. "There's no conclusive evidence that the guard was at fault," said Assemblyman Bruce Bronzan, D-Fresno, who was head of a legislative audit committee at the time the audit was ordered. "There's always the possibility there was pilot error. I think it's a sad situation that will remain sad." Two members of the Fresno Air Guard unit -- Capt. Wesley Deane, 27, and his weapons officer, Maj. John Jordan Jr., 39 -- died in 1987 when their F-4 jet crashed near Green Valley, Ariz. during training.

Questions surrounding the crash and the Fresno unit's training and record-keeping practices reached the Legislature last year during confirmation hearings for Adjutant Gen. Robert Thrasher as head of the California National Guard. The Legislature then requested the audit.

The 46-page auditor's report was the result of a yearlong, \$100,000 investigation into the performance, safety and record-keeping habits of the Fresno-based 144th Fighter-Interceptor Wing, a California Air National Guard unit that operates indirectly under the Air Force through state offices.

The report contains two major findings.

The auditor general concluded that the Fresno unit's record-keeping practices since shortly after the accident are correct and up to date.

But complete information on how the unit functioned at the time of the crash and earlier, including an Air Force investigation report, was either missing or unavailable.

"We were denied access to prior records and an Air Force investigation report," Sjoberg said. "Those two limitations made it impossible for us to conclude as to what went on before."

The auditors said it was impossible to "independently verify the adequacy" of 21/2-years worth of records that had been kept by air-unit officers and enlisted personnel. They said most of the paperwork was either incomplete or had been legally destroyed because it was more than 12 months old, as allowed by Air Force regulations.

Thrasher, in a statement released in response to Sjoberg's report, said Sjoberg's team was provided with "all (available) records and documents" connected with air crew training, aircraft maintenance and flight safety for the period between January 1985 and September 1987. The exception: "Those out- of-date materials which Air Force regulations require to be disposed of ... "

Thrasher also said inspection teams at the time rated the unit's management and operations as "excellent."

The question of pilot training is crucial to Toni Jordan, the widow of one of the crew members who died in the crash. She charges that widespread sloppiness and lackadaisical record keeping allowed pilots to fly into situations for which they were not fully prepared or certified.

Toni Jordan, who was not available for comment Wednesday, has said she has paperwork and documents obtained under the federal Freedom of Information Act showing evidence of at least eight complaints about falsified training records dating to 1986.

A report leaked to The Bee last year concluded that Deane, the pilot in the crash, was not "currently qualified" or certified for part of the mission he was performing in his F-4.

Sjoberg said his auditors were hampered because the Air Force withheld its investigation reports into the accident.

Thrasher, who could not be reached for comment, said in his statement that he pushed the Air Force to release the full "mishap safety investigation" report because he could not legally do so on his own.

Said Thrasher in his prepared statement: "To our regret, the Air Force refused our request, citing executive privilege against release of these documents and a number of United States Supreme Court cases supporting this position."

The California Air National Guard did, however, provide Sjoberg's auditors a summary of its investigation. It did not cite a cause for the accident, but stated that Deane met the minimum flying requirements.

The Air Guard report noted that Deane was not up to date in his training requirements to fly a low-altitude maneuver that he apparently completed during the 1987 flight.