

More on pilot error NEW JERSEY strafing

Source: <http://sci.tech-archive.net/Archive/sci.med.dentistry/2004-12/7175.html>

From: Joel M. Eichen (joeleichen_at_yahoo.com)

Date: 12/18/04

Date: Sat, 18 Dec 2004 08:19:14 -0500

Posted on Sat, Dec. 18, 2004

RELATED CONTENT

JOHN COSTELLO / Inquirer

Col. Brian L. Webster, commander of the 177th Fighter Wing of the New Jersey Air National Guard, speaks at the Little Egg Harbor Township Building. About 70 people attended the public meeting last night.

F-16 pilot misused targeting device

The Air Force said he squeezed the trigger too hard, sending bullets into a S. Jersey school.

By Edward Colimore and Adam Fifield

Inquirer Staff Writers

An Air National Guard F-16 pilot was trying to use a laser-targeting device when he accidentally squeezed the trigger too hard, firing 20mm rounds that landed on a South Jersey school last month, the Air Force said yesterday.

The pilot had been warned against using the laser marker – located on the same trigger as the gun – before taking off on the training mission over the Warren Grove Weapons Range in Ocean County.

Air Force investigators said that poor control design, the flight pattern, and lack of published safety procedures contributed to the accidental discharge of bullets.

The pilot, identified as Maj. Roberto Balzano of the 113th Wing of the District of Columbia National Guard, based at Andrews Air Force Base

in Maryland, was turning for his strafing run at 9:10 p.m. Nov. 3 when he unintentionally squeezed the trigger too hard.

The aircraft's gun fired a quarter-second burst, releasing 27 bullets. Falling at a speed of 400 m.p.h., some of the lead bullets landed at the Little Egg Harbor Township Intermediate School four miles away. Eight rounds hit the roof; five that went through the ceilings of two classrooms and a storage area were recovered.

Custodial workers were inside the school at the time, but no one was injured.

Officials with the New Jersey Air National Guard held a community meeting last night at the Little Egg Harbor Township administration building to outline the report on the incident and discuss changes at Warren Grove designed to prevent a similar accident. About two dozen residents and elected officials attended, outnumbered by members of the news media.

After the firing, Balzano immediately reported the discharge and transmitted a "knock it off" call over his radio to cease all tactical maneuvering, according to the report, released yesterday by the Accident Investigation Board composed of Air Force and Air National Guard officials.

"Were you trying to mark or something?" asked Maj. Kirk Pierce, an instructor pilot in an accompanying F-16, during radio contact with Balzano.

"Yes," said Balzano, identified in the report as MP (Mishap Pilot).

"That's what we talked about, don't do that," said Pierce.

"Yeah," said Balzano.

"That is why I covered that in brief," said Pierce.

Balzano had "pulled the trigger to laser mark his intended target...," the report said. "At the same time, the MP lost awareness that the aircraft's gun was selected and armed when he pulled the trigger."

Col. Kevin W. Bradley, president of the Accident Investigation Board, said in the report that "using the same trigger for both laser marking and firing the aircraft's gun significantly increases the risk of human error and an unintentional gun discharge."

Outside Balzano's Riva, Md., home late yesterday, the pilot's commanding officer, Col. Jeff Johnson, met briefly with reporters but declined to comment.

No disciplinary action has been announced.

Balzano, who has more than 2,000 hours of flight time – 975 hours of it in an F-16 – arrived home later and drove into his garage without offering comment.

"The pilot had no intent of firing at the school – the firing was an unfortunate and unintentional mistake," the National Guard Bureau said in a statement released in Arlington, Va., last night.

The investigation report disclosed that three other unintentional F-16 firings have been reported this year at Defense Department ranges during nighttime strafing passes. The ranges were not identified, but officials at last night's meeting said one was in New York state and two were in the West.

The Warren Grove range has been shut down since the incident. Brig. Gen. Eugene Chojnacki, commander of the New Jersey Air National Guard, said flights would resume there Dec. 21, but planes won't fire weapons or drop ordnance until sometime after Jan. 1.

Col. Brian L. Webster, commander of the New Jersey Guard's 177th Fighter Wing, told last night's community meeting that all aircraft using the range in the future would be restricted from arming weapons until the final leg of an attack pattern. He said flight routes would be altered to create the maximum distance between the aircraft and the range airspace boundary, to be sure weapons were pointed toward unpopulated areas.

He also said software changes would be made to aircraft systems to prevent further accidents.

Only F-16s with the software modification will be allowed to resume air-to-ground gun training, Chojnacki said.

"We feel like the range restrictions we put in place are quite sufficient to prevent another incident like this from ever happening again," Webster said.

Joe Stout, a spokesman for Lockheed Martin Aeronautics Co., which makes the F-16 in Fort Worth, Texas, said the company had not been notified of the report. The plane involved, produced in 1985, was among the oldest of the F-16Cs, which typically are found in the Guard and Reserve.

"Software changes on the F-16 are pretty routine," Stout said. "Software is updated periodically... I can't speculate how difficult or easy this is to do" without more knowledge of what changes are required.

The new software will go into 600 F-16s around the country, all built between 1983 and 1987, Webster said.

U.S. Rep. Jim Saxton said the Air National Guard apparently has done "a thorough job in identifying the probable causes of the accident and taken actions to remedy them."

U.S. Sen. Frank R. Lautenberg said the National Guard had briefed him on the new safety measures and now needs "to make its case to the community surrounding the range."

But he said closing the range might be needed "should anything like this happen again."

Lautenberg and Webster noted the importance of the Warren Grove range for training pilots. Webster described the range as "part of the backbone of our forces. It's absolutely vital to the protection of our troops."

In Little Egg Harbor Township, Michael Dupuis, president of the board of education, said the incident proved to be "a major learning experience for both the military and the people of the community."

"It's a shame that it took something like this for the military to figure out that they've had a problem," he said. "I feel comfortable that it is now finally going to be taken care of. However, I wish that they had found out that it was poor design prior to any incidents happening."

Charlene Smith, president of the Little Egg Harbor Township Parent-Teacher Association, said the pilot should be reprimanded.

"I didn't expect them to come back and actually admit" pilot error, she said. "I'm actually kind of glad that they did. That shows me they really looked into this problem and really took the time to find out what happened."

Smith said the school had received "a lot of damage. The bullets hit seams in the roof," she said. "How are we going to fix it? Is the military going to step up and take full responsibility for the damage that's done to the school?"

"This should never happen again. Nobody should have to walk out of the house in fear that they're going to miss a target again. I think safety precautions should be taken to the utmost now."

Contact staff writer Edward Colimore at 856-779-3833 or ecolimore@phillynews.com. Inquirer staff writers Troy Graham and Todd Mason and Charles Homans of the Inquirer Washington Bureau contributed to this article.