

Crewmen eject after midair collision

DALLAS — An RF-4B Phantom jet crashed in flames on a golf course yesterday after a midair collision with a second Marine Corps jet fighter, a military spokesman said.

Two crewmen aboard the downed aircraft — Lt. Col. Burton P. Sperry III, 40, of Orange, Calif., the pilot, and Capt. Michael S. Fagan, 31, of El Toro, Calif., radar intercept officer — bailed out and received minor injuries, a spokesman said.

A spokesman at the El Toro Marine Corps Air Station said the two Phantoms were part of a three-plane flight that had just departed Dallas Naval Air Station on a flight to Homestead Air Force Base near Miami.

There were no reported injuries on the ground when the Phantom crashed on the golf course at Mesquite, about eight miles east of Dallas.

The second jet returned safely to the Dallas Naval Air Station.

Apr. 25, 1980
Mesquite, Texas
Aircraft #151975/RF01
(Pilot) Lt.Col Burton P. Sperry III
(RSO) Capt. Michael S. Fagan
Cause: Inflight collision with another RF-4B.

Courtesy Of Lee R. De Haven

On 24 April VMFP-3 was preparing to deploy a detachment of nine RF-4B's to Homestead AFB, Florida. This constituted the bulk of the Main Body and may have been undertaken while the runways at MCAS, El Toro were undergoing scheduled repair/resurfacing. An all aircrew briefing was conducted to cover the enroute procedure and formation procedures; including among other topics the proper procedure in case of 'loss of visual contact' in inclement weather.

At 0600 hours local time on 25 April, aircrew met in the squadron Ready room for their final briefing. The first of three flights of three RF-4Bs each was manned by: Lt.Col. Burton P. Sperry III, Pilot (having just assumed command of the squadron on 12 April) Capt. Michael S. Fagan, RSO, in RF-4B 151975/RF01; Capt. John E. Hill, Pilot/1Lt. William D. Lauerman, RSO in RF-4B 153101/RF20; and 1Lt. Reed L. Olson, Pilot/CWO4 Darrel H. Cook, RSO, manning the third (unidentified) RF-4B.

There was some last minute maintenance/repair work performed on the RSO's seat pan in 151975/RF01, after which the flight proceeded to take off. Shortly after launch, Lt.Col. Sperry passed the flight lead to Capt. Hill (153101/RF-20) due to instrument problems and possible gyro difficulties in 151975. The flight proceeded to NAS Dallas, Texas, ending with an uneventful landing. Taking a breather, aircrews rechecked the enroute weather-- due to thunderstorms building up in the area of the original flight path, the flight changed their flight path to a more northerly route. The flight briefed again with Capt. Hill/RF20 now the flight leader; the flight was to remain clear of the clouds.

Meanwhile, the aircrew in Dash 2 made safe ejections. Capt. Fagan ejected through the rear canopy; the oxygen supply then failed to activate due to a flaw in the design of the activator switch; then the drogue slug struck the NES-8B parachute canopy, tearing a hole in one panel. He suffered a minor concussion and separated shoulder--he was transported from the scene by civilian ambulance. Lt.Col Sperry was located by a civilian policeman on routine patrol; he then apparently returned to NAS Dallas aboard the Marine Reserve MAG-41 Sikorsky CH-53 Sea Stallion helicopter dispatched to the scene.

The majority of the wreckage debris of RF-4B 151975 was buried in a deep crater, restricting accessibility for investigators. Between the point of the mid-air collision and ground impact further along only the front canopy, ejection seats and the aircrew were recovered. Other debris fell over a 2 sq. mi. populated area with resulting civilian and public property damage.

RF-4B 151975 was destroyed after only 1,346.6 flight hours (3 major overhauls) on the airframe as compared to the 3,192.3 hours on RF-4B 153103 (5 major overhauls) The low flight hours was a result of the years spent in storage at Davis Monthan AFB, Arizona. RF-4B 153103 underwent repair at NAS Dallas

through pre-flight and the functional check flight. A combination of 1,100 manhours by personnel from VMFP-3 (300 manhours) and a NARF team (800 manhours) were spent, at a total cost of \$111.613.

Aircrew Stats:

Total Lt.Col. Sperry-4,545 (407 in the RF-4B) Capt. Fagen-1,022 (902 in RF-4B), Capt. Hill-896 (554), 1Lt. Lauerman-224 (73), The Instrument Card Type Expiration Date: Lt.Col. Sperry-Special through 30/01/81; Capt. Fagan, No Current; Capt. Hill, standard through 31/01/81; 1Lt. Lauerman, 31/08/80.

Aircraft Stats:

Information below supplied by:

Rich Rentrop

The aircraft that crashed was 151975, which was the first RF-4B built (first flight was March 12, 1965). This aircraft was stored at MASDC (now AMARC) from December 1970 to at least mid 1972

Final Note:

Lt.Col. Sperry was relieved as VMFP-3 CO on 2 May after holding the post for less than one month. This was the shortest duration for an RF-4B squadron CO and may be a reflection of the intolerance for accidents during this period of political and public dissatisfaction with the military.

NAVY DALLAS CLEARANCE
GROUND - TOWER

RF-01 Clearance, this is RF-01, put my clearance on request.
Clnc RF-01, I have two clearances, ah, where you going?
RF-01 RF-01 going to Tyndall.
Clnc Understand going to Tyndall, I have your clearance.
RF-01 Ready to copy.
Clnc Marine RF-01 and flight is cleared to Tyndall; cleared as filed
except change routing Cedar 2 departure, Village transition,
Texarkana, direct Little Rock via flight plan route, climb and
maintain 3.0, expect FL 290, 10 minutes after departure. Departure
control frequency 322.1, squawk 3263 prior to departure, over.
RF-01 Clearance, RF-01 cleared as filed except for the Cedar route, direct
Little Rock, could you say again that part?
Clnc Cedar 2 departure, Village transition, but fly runway heading 3
DME, turn left heading 130, radar vecotrs Texarkana, direct Little
Rock via flight plan route.
RF-01 OK, copy that part, climb and maintain 3.0 thousand, expect 290
plus 10, squawking 2363, 322.1 departure frequency.

Cinc RF-01, read back correct. Understand you want to cancel clearance to Homestead?

RF-01 Ah, that's negative, that's going to be a stopover flight plan.

Cinc Roger, I have another clearance for RF-01, from Navy Dallas to Homestead Air Force Base.

RF-01 That's affirmative, with a stopover at Tyndall ... ok, clearance, I understand what you're saying now, I need to cancel the first clearance that goes direct to Homestead.

Cinc Roger, ok, I had two clearances for you, I just wanted to make sure. We'll remove strips on this Homestead flight.

Tower RF-01, Navy Dallas tower.

RF-01 RF-01, go ahead.

Twr Roger, I have an amendment to your clearance; vice Texarkana direct Little Rock, it will be radar vectors Texarkana J-131 Little Rock.

RF-01 Ok, thank you.

The first flight took off at the briefed 8-second intervals from Runway 17. Fifteen seconds after initial contact with Departure Control the Flight was turned left to 030°. Flight Lead was then directed to turn to a heading of 090°; during this turn Dash 03 (1LT Reed/CWO4 Cook, in RFO3) joined up on the left wing with Dash 2 (LCOL Sperry/CAPT Fagan, in RFO1) already in position on the right wing. The following is the actual transcript of this climb and turn: VMRFO1 is CAPT Hill, Flight Lead

2136:05
VMRFO1 Romeo fox zero one is airborne climbing to four thousand

2136:31
VMRFO1 Romeo fox zero one

2136:34
DR-1 Romeo fox zero one Regional Departure radar contact. How me

2136:38
VMRFO1 Hear you loud and clear

2136:41
DR-1 Romeo fox zero one roger climb and maintain one zero thousand

2136:45
VMRFO1 Romeo fox zero one leaving three for one zero thousand

2136:49
DR-1 Turn left heading zero three zero romeo fox zero one

2136:51
VMRFO1 Zero three zero

2137:26
DR-1 Romeo fox zero one climb and maintain one seven thousand what altitude you leaving

2137:31
VMRFO1 Fox zero one leaving four for one seven thousand

2137:33
DR-1 Traffic twelve o'clock less than a mile southwest bound type and altitude unknown

2137:38
VMRFO1 We're looking

2138:19
DR-1 Romeo fox zero one turn right heading zero nine zero

2138:22
VMRFO1 Romeo fox zero one zero nine zero

2138:24
DR-1 Roger

During this (8°) climbing turn the Flight entered the clouds at approximately 10,000-ft/3,041-m. After entering the clouds Dash 03 (RFO3)

called 'lost sight' and in accordance with the lost sight procedures turned 30° to the left; Dash 2 (RFO1) lost site and broke off to the right.

2139:20

VMRFO1 Mayday---Mayday---Mayday---(unintelligible)---center this romeo fox zero one we've had a mid-air collision Dash two is on his way down

During the maneuvering while transitioning to flight instruments Dash 2's nose contacted the right side of Dash 1's tail hook; continuing right to left, further impacting Dash 1 from the drag chute door (deploying the drag chute) forward 5.5-ft/1.7-m along the lower left aft fuselage with the deepest gouging between 58- and 64-inches forward of the tail (147-163-cm). As Dash 2 continued right to left the final impact impacted the lower left stabilator, ripping away approximately two-thirds of the stabilator. The impact caused Dash 2's nose section to disintegrate. The combination of Dash 1 stabilator and Dash 2 nose debris caused massive Foreign Object Damage (FOD) to Dash 2's engines with visible fire. Dash 2 immediately became uncontrollable and the aircrew ejected.

2139:32

DR-1 Romeo fox zero one understand you have had a mid-air collision is that correct

2139:37

VMRFO1 Affirmative we have lost one RF four just went down from behind us

2139:40

DR-1 Romeo fox zero one roger

2139:42

VMRFO1 Like to declare an emergency---we've been hit and we don't know the extent of our damage

2139:45

DR-1 Romeo fox zero one roger are you able to descend sir

2139:49

VMRFO1 (unintelligible) it's flying but I've lost all my flight I don't know where they are so I don't want to descend might be somewhere below us---he's on the ground now

2140:01

VMRFO3 That's two that crashed we're okay I've got you in sight one

2140:04

VMRFO1 Rog join me right away and check me over

VMRFO3 Center dash 2 crashed about 20 mi out passing right front

VMRFO1 I'm at 250 knots

VMRFO3 OK we're going to slow it down and come back starboard

VMRFO1 I think he hit me underneath somewhere--saw 01 going down with fire coming from both engines--can you see where he hit back there
Where you going 03

VMRFO3 I'm trying to get back with you

VMRFO1 I'm heading 010 and you're heading away from me now I'm at 12000

VMRFO3 OK let me come right (unintelligible) OK we're coming left 010

VMRFO1 Lead's steady now 015

VMRFO3 Say your speed

VMRFO1 285

VMRFO3 Roger

VMRFO3 OK you're going back into Dallas?

VMRFO1 Say again, Darrel

VMRFO3 You're going back into Dallas?

VMRFO1 That's affirm---I'll get VFR and stay VFR---I want you to check

me over first before to see where I want to go
VMRFO3 Affirmative
2142:10
DR-1 OK romeo fox zero one this is departure can you talk now
2142:14
VMRFO1 That's affirm sir go ahead
2142:14
DR-1 Alright sir you want to go back to Navy Dallas is that correct
2142:16
VMRFO1 I would like to get my ah---wingman---join on me to check me over
---ah---I believe I was hit underneath but I can't be sure at the
moment till he checks me over
2142:25
DR-1 Okay sir do you want to turn back left to southwest bound then
to have him join up with you or you going to join up on your present
heading
2142:33
VMRFO1 Like to turn right--stay clear of the clouds
2142:36
DR-1 Okay a turn right will be fine sir and--ah--is one of the aircraft
is down is that correct
2142:42
VMRFO3 That--ah--RFO1 is down I didn't see the crew punch out because
of clouds we broke away from the formation
2142:57
VMRFO1 Approach this is ah romeo four zero one ah I think we saw one
parachute
2143:02
DR-1 Roger you saw one parachute were there two men in the aircraft
2143:03
VMRFO1 That's affirmative sir
Two men in aircraft one parachute observed--ah--roger thank you
2143:13
VMRFO1 We were 20 miles out on the radial we were on as the time
2143:25
DR-1 And wing man romeo fox zero two if you like squawk zero one one
three and I'll try to vector you into join
2143:30
VMRFO3 Ah we're joining up now sir
2143:32
DR-1 OK you got him in sight and you're joining up roger
VMRFO3 Your hook is down
VMRFO1 No hook is up
VMRFO3 OK
VMRFO3 The hook is down
VMRFO1 How about my drop tanks..do they look good They (unintelligible)
come on over here?
VMRFO3 Your left stabilator got some damage
VMRFO1 Have some problems with the nose and the drag chute door knocked
open
VMRFO3 Other than that you're looking good, just some stabilator damage
and your hook will be down so you'll be taking an arrested landing
when you get back
VMRFO1 Ah no problem there I'll burn down until these drops get burned
down. It looks like the controlability is pretty good. I'd like
to burn by drops before I get a controlability check though
VMRFO3 OK
2145:00

VMRFO1 And ah center romeo fox zero one
2145:02
DR-1 Romeo fox zero one go ahead
2145:04
VMRFO1 Sir if you'll just kind ah vector us in a circle out here
approximately twenty miles from where we are we'll burn down over
this least populated area and ah when we get our drop tanks depleted
we like to--ah--be directed back into Navy Dallas for a short field
arrestment
2145:19
DR-1 Romeo fox zero one roger and you're going to be in descending turns
is that correct?
2145:24
VMRFO1 Going to stay at twelve thousand sir
2145:26
DR-1 You want to stay at twelve thousand okay if you'll make your turns
from present position to the west you can resume your own navigation
air and ah can you do it all in VFR conditions?
2145:35
VMRFO1 Affirmative
2145:37
DR-1 Okay fine just remain VFR and resume own navigation and let me
know ah when you're ready to return to Navy Dallas
2145:43
VMRFO1 Roger
2146:00
VMRFO1 Ah center do you have the ah search ah crews launched
2146:14
VMRFO1 Center do you have the search and rescue launched yet
2149:19
DR-1 Yes they've been notified zero one
2146:22
VMRFO1 OK

***** END TRANSCRIPT QUOTES *****