

A-10 Case Closed: Crash Ruled Suicide

Colorado Springs

A U.S. Air Force accident investigation board has concluded that Capt. Craig D. Button intentionally crashed his A-10A into a Colorado mountain last April, although the suicide probably was not premeditated.

Button was flying a three-ship, live-ordnance training mission on Apr. 2 when he broke from the formation and disappeared. Radar data confirmed he flew a generally straight course from Arizona to Colorado, varying altitude. About 495 naut. mi. from where he left the formation, and with approximately 2 min. of fuel remaining, the pilot descended rapidly and crashed into the face of a cliff on Gold Dust Peak (*AW&ST* Apr. 14, p. 29).

The investigating officer, Col. Philip J. Frazee, concluded, "Based on all available evidence, it is my opinion that, for unknown reasons, [Button] spontaneously elected to leave his briefed formation, consciously flew the aircraft to Colorado, and committed suicide by impacting (sic) terrain while in controlled flight."

Aircraft malfunction was ruled out, as was partial or total pilot incapacitation. Analyses of altitude and heading changes indicated Button had to be in control of the A-10.

Board findings included:

- The pilot had no medical problems. His only medical defect was a functional heart murmur, but he had been cleared for flight duties by a normal electrocardiogram in June 1987.
- Button never activated his Identification Friend or Foe system, and did not respond to numerous radio calls.
- The A-10's ejection seat had not been activated.
- Recovered remains showed no evidence of HIV, alcohol or drugs.
- There is no evidence to support a theory that the pilot intended to steal the A-10 and its ordnance.
- Despite circumstantial evidence that Button was under increased stress, or potentially upset over unknown personal matters, he left no clues that he intended to commit suicide.

The Mk. 82 bombs Button carried may have been jettisoned before the crash. The report says, "There is no indication that the four 500-lb. bombs . . . are within the [1.5-mi.] radius of the impact site. This supports the conclusion that the pilot released the weapons prior to impact."