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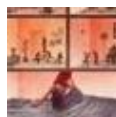
The Boston Globe

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Mass. National Guard fighter jet crashes in Va.

By **Bryan Bender** and **Matt Rocheleau** | GLOBE STAFF AND GLOBE CORRESPONDENT AUGUST 28, 2014



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STAUNTON, Va. — An F-15 Eagle jet from the Massachusetts Air National Guard crashed in a remote part of Virginia Wednesday, setting off a massive search in the George Washington National Forest for the pilot, who

witnesses said appeared to have ejected from the disabled plane.

The aircraft was flying at high altitude about 130 miles southwest of Washington on its way from Westfield, Mass., to Naval Air Station Joint Reserve Base New Orleans, where it was scheduled to undergo a radar system upgrade, according to officials at the 104th Fighter Wing at Barnes Air National Guard Base.

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“At this time we have not had contact with the pilot,” Colonel James Keefe, the 104th Fighter Wing commander, told reporters Wednesday afternoon, describing the unidentified officer as experienced.

“He is well trained to survive,” Keefe said. “It is a traumatic event for everyone here. We are thinking about the family.”

The pilot radioed a distress signal to air traffic controllers near Washington at 9:05 a.m. before losing contact. Shortly afterward came reports of dark smoke billowing from the crash site near the small town of Deerfield.

Officials said there were no reported injuries on the ground.

The search for the pilot began almost immediately by the Virginia State Police in the heavily forested mountains, some of whose peaks are 4,000 feet above sea level. In the event the pilot is found to have died, his identity will be released publicly only after the family is notified, or when 48 hours have passed with no information on his fate, according to the unit’s protocols.



By nightfall, personnel from the Department of Defense, Homeland Security, FBI, Federal Aviation Administration, and the Virginia Air National Guard were combing the area.

The Massachusetts National Guard dispatched a 13-member team to help assist in securing the crash site. Brigadier General Robert Brooks, head of the Massachusetts Air National Guard, was expected at the scene on Thursday.

Aircraft specially outfitted with night vision equipment were also dispatched from the West Virginia National Guard, a senior military official directly involved in the operation said.

Corinne Geller, spokeswoman for the Virginia State Police, said crews were searching late Wednesday night on the ground and by air. Ground searches were focusing on logging roads, fire trails, and forest roads, she said.

At least 100 State Police troopers, sheriff's deputies, and fire and rescue personnel were on scene, Geller said. Four helicopters were assigned to aerial searches at night, and about 10 search-and-rescue teams participated in the night's efforts on the ground.

Lieutenant Anthony Mutti, a spokesman for the 104th, said the search will continue through the night.

"We did send off a small group of individuals from the 104th this evening, mostly security personnel and a few specialists."

Speaking to reporters in Westfield, Keefe said it was possible the pilot ejected without his survival kit, including his radio. Pilots are trained to dump their survival gear when ejecting over heavily forested terrain to minimize the chances of getting snagged in the trees, Keefe said. But officials stressed that no information was known about the pilot's whereabouts or condition.

Major Matthew T. Mutti, another spokesman for the 104th and the brother of Anthony Mutti, said reports of an opening parachute were "inconsistent, and everything is speculation." He also said that because the pilot may have ejected while traveling at such high speed, he would almost certainly be located some distance from

the crash site, depending on wind direction and other conditions.

The senior military official estimated that the pilot, who was flying at nearly 40,000 feet, could have traveled a mile for each 1,000 feet he descended.

The rugged terrain and the limited communication in the area were further complications.

“All of those things are hampering our ability to find the pilot at this point,” Matthew Mutti said.

Augusta County Sheriff’s Office dispatcher Jennie McNeal said there is no cellphone service in the area of the crash site.

“We have not been able to talk to anybody,” Keefe, the 104th commander, told reporters five hours after the initial report of the crash.

Several Deerfield residents said in telephone interviews that they had heard explosions and saw smoke.

Howard Beck, 80, said that he heard an explosion and could see smoke rising in the distance, about four miles away.

“It was quite the explosion,” Beck said.

Steven Graham, 56, who lives about four miles from the crash site, said he felt his house shake when the jet hit the ground.

“[The crash site] is very tough to access by car,” he said. “There are some dirt roads leading to the vicinity, but you would have to get out and walk on foot to reach the exact spot.”

Mary Stroop, 62, said she was standing outside with her husband when she heard three “sonic booms” come from the sky.

“To be honest, I thought we were being bombed,” Stroop said. Immediately following the first boom, Stroop said, she heard the ground shake. She said she lived about three miles from where the crash occurred.

“As we saw the fire go up, I saw something gray with a long front end fly toward the right,” she said. “It was intact and seemed like it could have been separated from the plane [that crashed] or a second plane.”

The F-15, a C model, can accommodate only one pilot and is designed for air-to-air combat. It was introduced in the late 1970s and was manufactured by McDonnell Douglas, which later merged with Boeing.

“I can’t even tell you the last time we had a mishap in the F-15C model,” Keefe said.

The aircraft was meant to be replaced by the new F-22 Raptor, but in 2009 the Air Force significantly scaled back how many F-22 Raptors it would buy, which means many F-15s will be flown far longer than anticipated.

Martin Finucane of the Globe staff and Globe Correspondent Rachel Riley contributed to this report. Bryan Bender can be reached at bender@globe.com. Matt Rocheleau can be reached at matthew.rocheleau@globe.com. Bender reported from Washington, Rocheleau from Westfield, and Finucane and Riley from Boston.



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