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Pilots Safe After Midair Collision

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Two Air Force F-16C fighter jets collided in midair during a training run Wednesday, injuring both pilots and destroying one of the \$20 million aircraft.

Pilots Paul Hertzberg and Scott Hufford were treated for minor injuries from the 1:30 p.m. collision over the Utah Test and Training Range, 105 miles west of Hill Air Force Base, officials said.

Hertzberg safely ejected from his crippled jet, which crashed in a fireball. Hufford managed to land his damaged single-engine fighter at Michael Army Airfield at Dugway Proving Ground. Both pilots are with the 421st Fighter Squadron.

Hertzberg was picked up by a Utah Army National Guard helicopter about 17 miles from where the planes collided, and was flown to a hospital at the base for treatment. Hufford was treated at the scene.

The collision, which occurred over the remote area of western Utah desert, was the first midair collision for active-duty jets stationed at Hill since the base opened in 1940. The base oversees maintenance for more than 3,900 F-16s for the United States and 17 other nations.

"Luckily in this crash, since it happened on the range, there was nothing in the way," said Air Force spokesman Rob Koon, speaking from the Pentagon.

It wasn't the first midair crash in Utah. In 1987, a SkyWest Metroliner and Mooney aircraft crashed over Kearns, killing 12 people.

Wednesday's collision took place while six F-16Cs were training for air-to-air combat. Four jets in a fanlike formation were acting as the "blue air," or good guys. Two others, side-by-side, were taking the offensive as the "red air," or bad guys.

Hufford, on the red team, hit Hertzberg, on the blue team, while playing a supersonic game of hide-and-seek, according to Air Force officials. That much is known, though investigators likely will take months to figure out exactly what happened.

"Unfortunately, we can't be sure who collided with who," said Dennis Mehring, spokesman for the 388th Fighter Wing. "Fortunately, there were no reports of any serious injuries."

The F-16Cs were carrying inert AIM9 Sidewinder missiles bolted to the jets. During training, the missiles are used only for the electronic eye that pilots see through for targeting.

Fuel from Hertzberg's jet -- one of 70 active-duty F-16s belonging to the 388th and 419th fighter wings at Hill -- apparently caused the explosion.

"I don't know how much is left of it. Presumably not much," Mehring said. "We believe it to be a total loss."

An interim safety investigation board has been formed to probe the cause of the incident, officials said, while a convoy of military personnel was dispatched to the scene Wednesday night.

The Air Force has 809 F-16s in use, including those at Hill. There are four types: A and C are single-seaters, while B and D are two-seaters.

Last year, during more than 369,000 collective flying hours, there were 11 major accidents in the United States and one death involving the jets.

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Hill was the first base to have an operational wing for F-16s. It also is the nation's only major maintenance base for F-16s, which can travel faster than twice the speed of sound, or more than 1,200 mph.

Since the fighters arrived at Hill in 1979, there have been 37 F-16 crashes -- and no deaths.

Last February, for example, two Hill pilots were injured when their two-seater F-16 was struck by a bird. Midair crashes by U.S. military planes are rare, however.

There have been three recent ones outside Utah. Last March, two F-16s collided over the Gulf of Mexico on a training run.

Then in September, two more midair collisions occurred. A U.S. C-141 and a German TU-154 struck each other off the coast of Africa, killing nine Americans and 24 Germans.

Just three days later, two F-16s collided in midair during routine training at New Jersey.

In those F-16 crashes -- as in Wednesday's collision in Utah -- one pilot ejected safely while the other landed the plane.

Hill spokesman Bruce Collins said it takes months for the military to determine the cause of a crash or collision.

"Usually we're not going to find a single cause," Collins said, "since most accidents are caused by number of factors that all come together at the wrong time."



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