

Scrambling of fighter jets over Washington against off-course Cessna raises many questions

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On Sunday, residents in the Washington, D.C. region were alerted by a loud sonic boom overhead as military jets sped to intercept a private aircraft flying over the nation's capital. The jet, a Cessna Citation carrying several passengers, later crashed in the Northern Virginia wilderness as it ran out of fuel at around 3:30 p.m. Eastern Standard Time.

The plane was registered to Florida businessman John Rumpel and had reportedly been carrying members of his family, including his adopted daughter Adina Azarian, 2½-year-old granddaughter Aria, and their live-in nanny when it went down. The pilot was identified as Jeff Hefner, a retired Southwest Airlines pilot who had been flying planes for Rumpel “on and off” for five years, reports the *Washington Post*.

The Cessna had gone out of radio contact as it departed from an airport in Elizabethton, Tennessee on the way to an airstrip in New York State. Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) officials state all passengers died “under unknown circumstances.”

According to press reports the plane made a U-turn after reaching New York and flew back to the southwest, passing directly over the District of Columbia, where it was intercepted by the military. The *Post* cites former Federal Aviation Administration officials who state “flight-tracking data suggests that long before the plane reached New York, the pilot was not in control.”

The aircraft was intercepted by six F-16 fighter jets from air bases nearby. The sonic boom they created could be “heard from Springfield, Va., to Bowie, Md.” as the jets broke the sound barrier to quickly intercept the aircraft and determine if the situation represented a threat.

Post cited Monday, people the investigation” being conducted by the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) into the crash who said that the responding fighter pilots had seen the Cessna pilot “sitting in the left seat and slumped toward the right,” a sign that the cabin had lost air pressure mid flight, resulting in those on board losing consciousness.

After determining that the private jet was not a threat, the fighter jets flew alongside it in order to assure that it did not do any harm to the region. The NTSB plans to survey the crash site and could release a report in several months. According to Adam Gerhardt, lead NTSB investigator, “the wreckage is highly fragmented” and will take days to locate and survey.

In addition to the cause of the crash, there are differing explanations of how the plane could have performed a 180-degree turn in midair after reaching Long Island MacArthur Airport, its destination in New York, without the pilot being conscious.

NPR cites Michael J. McCormick, a former Federal Aviation Administration official, who believes the plane “must have been programmed in the autopilot flight control system for the next leg of flight to be from New York back to Tennessee or down to the southwest.”

This claim is contradicted by Hassan Shahidi, president of the Flight Safety Foundation. Shahidi told the *Post*, “It’s very unclear why it made this maneuver so close to its intended destination... The aircraft, especially the Cessna airplane... has to be directed by the pilot to take a certain flight path and altitude.”

It is possible that an autopilot system may have lined the plane up for landing in New York only to return

south again after failing to receive input from the pilot. This and other questions will be the focus of the NTSB's investigation.

There is no denying the devastating personal loss the event represents for those involved. According to statements provided by Rumpel to the *Post*, he has lost his "entire family" in the incident. However, the official response to the aircraft raises many questions.

There was apparent panic in the area where the sonic boom could be heard, an expression of the public anxiety in a population that includes tens of thousands of families connected to the national security apparatus. The story was greatly amplified by the national broadcast media, with the television networks making it their top story on the Sunday evening news. The *Post*'s front page led with the story Monday morning. The publication reported that "the sonic boom startled residents across the District, Maryland and Virginia around 3:10 p.m... and left people searching for the source of the sound."

An editorial in the *Post* Tuesday assures readers, "Sunday's sonic boom was the sound of a system that's working." The editorial gives a window into the sort of thinking within official Washington, home to dozens of branches and agencies of the federal government and military, which are currently preoccupied with the conduct of a war against nuclear-armed Russia while preparing for an even larger conflict with nuclear-armed China.

The editorial states, "This was a rare boom that counted as good news—evidence of the military's 24/7 readiness to defend against the kind of attack from the sky that hit the Pentagon and World Trade Center two decades ago," a reference to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. It states this is "especially welcome after the Chinese spy balloon debacle earlier this year highlighted vulnerabilities and gaps in the air defense system with regard to high-altitude surveillance."

There was a devastating loss of life on 9/11 when several commercial airliners were hijacked and aimed directly at high visibility targets, the World Trade Center in New York City and the Pentagon, killing more than 3,000. Despite the targeting of the headquarters of the US military, fighter jets were not called in at the time to respond.

In contrast, the off-course Cessna provoked the

arrival of six fully-equipped fighter jets within minutes. This occurred despite the fact that the private plane was flying at an altitude "not deemed a direct threat to the capital," reports NPR. According to McCormick, the former FAA official interviewed, "If the aircraft had sped up and started to descend toward Washington, then it would actually change that calculus" given the "many sensitive potential targets in the D.C. region."



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