

INTERNAL REPORT CONFIRMS HULTGREEN'S ERROR

By Becky Garrison

WASHINGTON -- A second report on the plane crash that killed Lt. Kara Hultgreen more clearly states that pilot error, combined with an engine malfunction, caused the aircraft to plunge into the Pacific Ocean Oct. 25.

Hultgreen, one of the first female combat aircraft pilots, crashed her F-14A as she attempted to land on the carrier Abraham Lincoln during routine training. Her radar intercept operator, Lt. Matthew Klemish, ejected safely and sustained minor injuries.

The second report, released internally March 14, is the Mishap Investigation Report. MIRs are written by members of the Aviation Mishap Board and are standard procedure for fatal accidents and those that cost the Navy more than \$1 million. No legal action can be taken based on the board's findings, and witnesses are guaranteed their testimony will not get them into trouble.

Privileged information

In addition, the reports are classified as ``privileged'' and are not made public. Rather, they are used for improving the safety of future flights and ``jealously guarded'' so that witnesses are assured that they can answer honestly without fear of incriminating themselves, said Vice Adm. Robert J. Spane, commander of Naval Air Force, Pacific Fleet.

A copy of the report was made available to Navy Times through unofficial channels.

The earlier report was a Judge Advocate General's Manual investigation, which is also standard in such accidents. This report, called a JAGMAN, is written by one appointed investigator. Witnesses are warned that their testimony may be used against them, because this report is used in claims, legal proceedings and disciplinary action regarding the accident.

But it's the MIR that is the more detailed, since its express purpose is not to cast blame, but rather to help other pilots avoid similar accidents in the future.

Both reports, however, ``lead to the same set of facts and will paint the same story,'' Spane said.

Among the top factors the MIR cites in the crash:

---Hultgreen's attempt to salvage a landing attempt after overshooting her approach to the carrier helped cause the left engine to stall.

---Hultgreen failed to execute proper single-engine waveoff procedures. The ``mishap pilot was distracted by mishap aircraft's close proximity to

water, and by efforts to determine engine status, and suffered breakdown in scan," the report says. That means she was not fully aware of all of her flight indicators.

---She failed to tell Klemish that there was a single engine emergency "due to task saturation, channelized attention and external distraction, resulting in lack of effective crew coordination." However, it's not clear whether Hultgreen was aware her engine had failed or whether the cockpit indicators that should have alerted her functioned.

---Hultgreen failed to make a timely decision to eject. "Mishap pilot was distracted externally, and fixated on determining engine and aircraft status," the report said. Klemish initiated ejection seconds before the plane crashed -- just in time for him, but too late to save the pilot, who automatically ejects 0.4 seconds after the backseater.

---The left engine mid-compressor by-pass system was stuck in "bleeds closed" position, increasing the risk of stall. "Although not sufficient alone to stall the engine, this malfunction, combined with reduced throttle setting and sideslip, contributed to the left engine compressor stall."

---The squadron commander failed to provide single engine waveoff training "due to complacency and unforeseeable problem," the MIR says. "Engine failure in approach turn, followed by waveoff, requires a high level of situational awareness, proper instrument scan and proper application of flight controls to fly away safely," the report continues. "Lack of recent single engine waveoff training reduced mishap pilot's proficiency in this critical flight regime, leading to poor situational awareness and improper procedures."

The report rejected any notion that Klemish mishandled his role in the approach. And it also said there was no mechanical failure of the engines, noting that both engines were fully capable of producing power at impact.

Deciphering differences

Still, the second report bolsters some of the findings of the JAGMAN. But mention of pilot contribution to the crash are buried deep in the first report -- introductory pages emphasize the mechanical failure and most published news accounts of that report's release did the same.

In fact, the top page of the JAGMAN brushes over Hultgreen's role in the crash: "The emergency resulting in the mishap was precipitated by a left engine malfunction at an extremely vulnerable moment as the aircraft was approaching the carrier to land. The pilot attempted to continue flying the aircraft to safety but was unable to do so."

One recent mention of the first report in Time magazine used the word "vindicated" to describe how the report had cleared Hultgreen of fault in the accident.

Such news reports angered aviators in the Navy and civilian world, because most accident reports include mention of some type of human error. In

Navy plane crashes involving F-14s, A-6s or F/A-18s during the past 10 years, for example, human error has been a factor 80 percent of the time. But reports aren't just categorized as ``pilot error'' or ``mechanical malfunction,'' Spane said.

And the cause of most crashes, like Hultgreen's, are often blamed on a combination of problems with the air crew, supervisors and equipment.

Still, many people hoped the second, more comprehensive MIR would be more forthcoming in explaining what caused Hultgreen's F-14A to crash.

But the MIR is a privileged document and not subject to general release. In fact, it contains a warning that ``unauthorized disclosure of the information in this report is a criminal offense punishable under Article 92, Uniform Code of Military Justice.''

``It is very clear in the MIR that it is a privileged document,'' Spane said. ``It is very inappropriate to release it to the public.''

Even so, that didn't stop the fax machines once the report was completed. News organizations across the country obtained copies of the report and some -- notably the Los Angeles Times -- erroneously reported that the Navy had reversed its findings in the cause of the accident.

For the complete text of the Mishap Investigation Report, see the Military City Online text library. Use keyword (MCOHQ) select Libraries, then Text.

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