

Mickey Rountree

572509 Real Story



The Real Story of the F-106 “509 Accident”

F-106A 57-2509, 84th FIS Hamilton AFB, CA

from a pilot who was in it

Michael E. (Mickey) Rountree, LtCol USAF (Ret)

*Recently, I became aware of the stories that are published at http://www.f-106deltadart.com/photo_gallery/index.php/84th-FIS. These are about what happened just before midnight on 5 July 1972, at Hamilton AFB, California, but they are all (innocently) wrong!. All of the write-ups have elements of truth, but also there are many key assertions are **simply wrong**. I understand how the story gets messed up in hearsay with the passage of time. So, being one of the pilots actually in the accident, I want to get the correct facts on the record.*

So, here we go!

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### **First of all, who was involved and why?**

It was a routine training mission, to qualify two of us in night air-refueling. The flight lead/instructor was the B-model (two seater, 2509), with Lt. Bill Yeager in the front seat, and Maj. Gary Shepard (the instructor) in the back seat. I was in an A-model (single-seat), as the wingman. Both Bill and I were new guys, and had to get night air refueling checked off our training list. So, all the talk about a “check flight” are wrong; it was a routine training qualification for a specific event/skill.

Before going into the flight details, I want to address a few errors in other reports, regarding the runway environment at Hamilton. The picture below (Fig 1.) is a bit blurry (we did not have I-Phones back then) but it will work for these points.



Fig 1. Hamilton AFB in 1972

The runway at Hamilton was quite different from most. First, it was not short. It was twelve thousand feet (about two miles) long, plus overruns, significantly longer than most fighter bases. BUT, it was also **400 feet wide** – this fact, plus the long length, are very significant to understanding why the crash happened. The standard runway is 150 feet wide. At Hamilton there were big white stripes at the standard 150 foot width. These lines were a primary visual reference during daylight landings (see photo above). But at night it is not the paint stripes you see during the day, but rather the runway lights. Runway lights are set just off the edge of the runway. So, a standard runway has rows of lights that are about 170 feet apart; but at Hamilton they were about 420 feet apart – about three times the standard. This arrangement contributed to the visual illusion that led to the accident. Also, the runway overrun on the south end actually sloped down to the runway, starting at the dyke – so, on a normal landing; you could barely see the overrun during approach, day or night. And if you were low, you could not see it at all.

## **Flight Details**

The primary mission was a night checkout in air-to-air refueling. We also were to “bump heads” on night air intercepts of “evasive targets.” The weather was great – clear and little wind. We took off at about 8 PM, in tight-wing formation. Once reaching the reserved airspace, we split up to do the various intercept exercises. As dark settled over the area, we joined up and went to meet the tanker. The refueling went fine, and we left with another hour of fuel on board. So, after another hour of random night intercepts, we headed home.

Although the weather was completely clear, the plan was to fly a GCA (Ground Controlled Approach) for our landing approach. (The controllers needed training too.) It was a very dark night, no moon at all. As we glided down over a glass gentle San Pablo Bay, Bill gave me

the signal to tighten it up, so I crawled up into the tight formation on his left wing. The air was smooth and visibility unlimited.

Then came the trouble. It was a routine approach until we got to about three miles out on final, and controller called us "low". I just kept my position, and that's full time job at night. Then at about one mile out, the controller called "Too low for safe approach - If runway not in sight go around!" So I had to take a peek! I saw the runway in front of us, but did not have time to assess altitude. When I looked back, lead he had climbed about 15 feet, so I just jumped back into the formation landing position and stayed there. The formation landing position is higher than the normal position. (The idea is to get your wheels level with leads wheels.) As it turns out, that move was probably what saved my young butt.

From Bill and Gary's perspective, it looked like a normal landing. It is not uncommon to get that alert from GCA, because their approach path is designed to land at least 1,500 feet down the runway, but any good fighter pilot wants to get it down in the first 500 - 1,000 feet. Here is where the 400 foot wide runway and landing lights comes into play. The visual impression that Bill and Shep had was that we were almost on the runway. But in fact, we were about a half mile out! I was now locked in to flying the best wing position possible. (I had never done a night formation landing, ever.)

Then the ground collision started. Lead was lined up just to the right of the centerline approach lights, which are a series of very large permanent fixtures holding the large approach lights. His impact was primarily with those fixtures, and they destroyed his left main gear. Bill and/or Shep's reaction was to climb away, and they did so by pushing the throttle into afterburner.

For me, I was holding my position until I hit the ground (not runway). That landing position adjustment to ride in a high position probably saved my life. Suddenly, my ride got extremely rough as I plowed through sagebrush and mud! As I glanced forward, I then heard lead's hard afterburner light-off "boom". I judged that to be a good idea for me too! Here is a picture of my impact and trail through the scrub brush (Fig 2):



Fig 2. My Impact and Run-out

You may note that there is only one tire track – that's because as soon as I saw sparks under lead, I banked left to get separation. You may note that from here you cannot see the runway because of the up-sloped overrun. Also, note that first contact happened just inches

below the top of the road. If you go backwards from that road you have a dyke, with about 15 degree banking. If I had been just a few feet lower, that dyke would probably have been the end of the aircraft, and perhaps, me too. But, we both got up and around, and I rejoined to assess the situation with lead.

The picture also shows the last few centerline approach lights that lead hit about a quarter mile back, over the water, and were built with heavy timbers and metal. Those are what tore apart 509's left main gear, and the left fuel tank was ripped open.

### **So -- What Now?**

We both accelerated, climbed and turned up and right, gently to set up for visual approaches. I chased down lead so that I could try an airborne visual assessment. With no usable lights (landing lights were torn away back in "crash") I flew to a position where I could see 509 silhouetted against the lights of Oakland & San Francisco. I told him that the left main was broken back. But that did not make much difference, because they were losing fuel, fast, and needed to land NOW! So, I just took up a chase position as they made their approach and landing. I watched and followed them down until they were on the runway, then pulled up and right to deal with my own problems. The radio was silent, so I had no idea what was happening.

### **My Best Landing, ever, period!**

Meanwhile, in my aircraft I had no green lights for landing gear, they all indicated "Unsafe". I had to turn up the lights to see the tiny gauges, to find that both hydraulic systems were up, but then turned the lights very dim to make a landing. I set up for a wide visual approach and made the normal radio call. But mine was different,

because all my landing gear said **unsafe**. My call was something like "Base, NO GREEN, but full stop anyway." Then came the loneliest moment in my life. I got no reply from the Tower. They are supposed to say something like "Clear to land, winds dah-de-dah. . .) I called again, and again, I got no response. I had previously declared an emergency, so I expected to see emergency vehicles lining the runway. But as I turned base there was absolutely no emergency vehicles, or anything else, to be seen. I called tower again, and got no response. At that time, it was like a "Twilight Zone" feeling. In hindsight, I suppose I should have taken it around until somebody would at least talk to me, but my focus was getting on the runway, now!!

**Then came the "grease job in the dark!"**. With unsafe gear indications, and no landing lights, I put that jet down so gently it still amazes me. I held the nose up until about 80 knots because I did not know what would happen when I let it down. I was able to get it stopped without brakes. (Nose gear steering and the drag chute still worked.)

The reason there was nobody to help was that they had ALL chased the 509 back behind the hangers. Nobody realized that there was another crippled aircraft sitting on the tarmac. That is not supposed to happen, and I later made a visit to the Chief of the tower crew about it.

Then came the frustration. I sat there, at the end of the runway for 42 minutes. I tried talking to tower, ground control with no reply. So, I went to our ADC Command Post. And they gave me a clue. I learned that ALL for the emergency response resources had chased my lead (509) up passed hangers and stopped on base! "The crew is OK!" is all I heard. I did not want to shut the engine down until the gear were pinned, and fire equipment was there (because the 106 vented about

a pint of fuel when shutting down.) It took about an hour to get my jet secured, and I had a ride back to Squadron Ops (on an aircraft tug.)

### **The Miracle of 509**

Everyone knows the end of the mission of 509, with my good friends Bill and Gary on board. Once they lowered the nose, with the left main torn away, they were on an uncontrollable ride. Figure 3 is the most famous image of the final resting place. In order to get to that place, on Hanger Ave. they had to thread through several parked aircraft on the ramp, then between two permanent (concrete) hangars, all the time uncontrolled.



Fig 3. 509 Resting Place

The F-106 had an ejection system which was good for a ground level ejection. Bill and Gary told me that they had hands wrapped around

the EJECT handles, as soon as they left the runway, totally uncontrolled. I did not see it from the air because I had turned away to handle my own problems.

Here is a graphic that shows the general track of the slide, as well as the original impact points.



Fig 4. Impact and Slide

## Epilogue

I was grounded for a few weeks while the Investigation Board checked out my story, then had to drive the bus (B-model) to get back certified. I don't remember what happened to Bill and Shep, but they were back pretty quickly. A few months later we had an ORI (Operational Readiness Inspection). The ORI team had to pick one or two pilots to do B-model evaluation flight, on a high / low defense profile, with the inspector in the back seat! (The first target at 37 thousand feet and the next at 300 feet, evasive maneuvers, with chaff.) Guess who they picked? I did quite well, mostly because I had confidence enough to use the autopilot to help me through the authentication process (called "cracking the cookie", a two hand task) before employing the simulated nuclear weapon. (But that is another story.)

For many years, Bill, Gary and I got together on the phone, on the anniversary of our "mishap" (July 5, 1972) to just celebrate life. All three of us measured our life that night in inches. For them it was the inches they missed parked aircraft and two buildings on the flight line; and for me it is the inches I was above that dyke!

I am pretty sure that this was the last time any USAF unit practiced any night formation landing! I did get "Wingman of the Year", and the maintenance guys presented me with an appropriate token when I left.

I hope this clears up the many articles that are not first person, but only hear-say. I hope Bill Yeager and Gary Shepard will also see this write-up, and contribute their memories as well.

*Mickey Rountree, LtCol USAF (Ret)*

[Mrountree1@woh.rr.com](mailto:Mrountree1@woh.rr.com)



Fig. 4. Hamilton Today! (The runway area is known as “Hamilton Wetlands.”) You can still see the dyke, swamp and overrun.



Fig. 5. Me and my Grandson at the display of 58-0787 (Cornfield Bomber) in the Air Force Museum. This is not the jet on that night, but I have time in this one too. Below is one month's official log to prove it (Fig. 6)

| PREPARED 72 NOV 09            |         | INDIVIDUAL FLIGHT RECORD |         |           |         |       |         |       |            |           |           |    |
|-------------------------------|---------|--------------------------|---------|-----------|---------|-------|---------|-------|------------|-----------|-----------|----|
| ROUNTREE MICHAEL E            |         | CPT 261-68-0174          |         |           |         |       | PILOT   |       |            |           |           |    |
| DATE                          | M/D/S   | TAIL NMBR                | MSN SYM | DUTY POSN | TOTAL   | DAY   |         | NIGHT |            | SIML INST | TRAIN SIM |    |
| MO                            | DAY     |                          |         |           |         | VFR   | INST    | VFR   | INST       |           |           |    |
| 10                            | 11      | F106A 062                | T3      | FP        | 2.0     | 1.3   | .7      |       |            |           |           |    |
| 10                            | 12      | F106A 062                | T3      | FP        | 2.3     | 1.2   | 1.1     |       |            |           |           |    |
| 10                            | 13      | F106A 787                | T3      | FP        | 2.1     | 1.5   | .6      |       |            |           |           |    |
| 10                            | 13      | F106A 787                | T3      | FP        | 2.3     | .8    | 1.5     |       |            |           |           |    |
| 10                            | 19      | F106A 020                | T3      | FP        | 2.2     | 2.0   | .2      |       |            |           |           |    |
| 10                            | 19      | SMF106A 009              | Q2      | FP        | 1.0     |       |         |       |            | 1.0       | 1.0       |    |
| 10                            | 19      | SMF106A 009              | Q2      | IP        | 1.0     |       |         |       |            | 1.0       | 1.0       |    |
| 10                            | 24      | F106A 115                | T3      | FP        | 3.4     | 1.2   |         | 2.2   |            |           |           |    |
| 10                            | 25      | F106A 140                | T3      | FP        | 2.6     | 2.6   |         |       |            |           |           |    |
| 10                            | 30      | SMF106A 009              | Q2      | FP        | 1.0     |       |         |       |            | 1.0       | 1.0       |    |
| 10                            | 30      | SMF106A 009              | Q2      | IP        | 1.0     |       |         |       |            | 1.0       | 1.0       |    |
| 10                            | 30      | F106A 787                | T3      | FP        | 2.3     |       |         | 2.3   |            |           |           |    |
| 10                            | 31      | F106A 063                | T3      | FP        | 2.5     | .1    |         | 2.1   | .3         |           |           |    |
| 10                            | 31      | F106A 063                | T3      | FP        | 2.4     | 2.0   | .4      |       |            |           |           |    |
|                               |         |                          |         |           | 24.1    | 12.7  | 4.5     | 6.6   | .3         |           | 4.0       |    |
| PILOT                         | 1ST-PLT | I/PLT                    | CO-PLT  | CMD-PLT   | AUX-PLT | OTHER | TOT-PLT |       |            | STUD      | CI        |    |
| THIS MON                      | 24.1    |                          |         |           |         |       | 24.1    |       |            |           |           |    |
| TO-DATE                       | 231.5   |                          | 2.3     |           |         |       | 233.8   |       |            | 184.3     |           |    |
| YOUR 60-1 ACCOMPLISHMENTS ARE |         |                          |         |           | TOTAL   |       | NIGHT   |       | INSTRUMENT |           | PREC - A  |    |
|                               |         |                          |         |           | YEAR    | HALF  | YEAR    | HALF  | YEAR       | HALF      | YEAR      | HI |
|                               |         |                          |         |           | 83.6    | 83.6  | 10.8    | 10.8  | 13.7       | 13.7      | 31        |    |

Fig. 6. October 1972 log.