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Stealth Jet Believed to Have Crashed : AF Seals Off Site Where Pilot Died Near Bakersfield

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## BAKERSFIELD

An Air Force plane, believed to be one of Lockheed's top-secret stealth jet fighters, crashed and burned in rugged terrain 15 miles northeast of here early Friday, killing the pilot and prompting authorities to impose an extraordinary news blackout.

The Air Force declared the crash site and the airspace above it "a national security area" out of bounds to the press and public.

Military and civilian officials would say little about the craft, which crashed at about 2 a.m. near 4,100-foot Saturday Peak on the western slope of the Sierra Nevada.

## Officials Tight-Lipped

Air Force spokesmen at the Pentagon and Edwards Air Force Base, about 65 miles to the southeast, and Nellis Air Force Base near Las Vegas, 210 miles east of the crash site, declined to answer most questions from reporters.

They would confirm only that a plane had crashed and killed its lone crew member, whose name was withheld pending notification of family members.

Military officials declined to identify the type of aircraft, the base from which it took off, its destination or its mission.

Air Force Lt. Col. Jerry F. Guess, a public information officer from Edwards, did say that the plane was not armed.

"No weapons whatsoever were involved," he said.

However, congressional sources in Washington said the downed craft was apparently an F-19 stealth fighter, built by Lockheed using the latest electronic technology and aerodynamic design intended to make detection by radar and infrared devices difficult, if not impossible.

"It is clearly the F-19 that crashed," said an investigator on the House Energy and Commerce Committee's oversight and investigations subcommittee.

The committee, chaired by Rep. John D. Dingell (D-Mich.), has been investigating alleged security leaks on the F-19 program at the Lockheed California Co. in Burbank.

The F-19 reportedly exploded in midair, explaining why the pilot was not able to safely eject and why there was little wreckage at the crash site, according to an Air Force source knowledgeable about the crash and who agreed to discuss the accident on condition that his name not be used.

This source also said the explosion was witnessed by a pilot in a chase aircraft. The use of a chase plane would be normal procedure in flight testing, especially with an aircraft as secret as the F-19, the source said.

If the aircraft is a Lockheed stealth fighter, then, according to previously published reports, it is one of several dozen in the Air Force's inventory built during the last five years at Lockheed's "Skunk Works" in Burbank, the secret facility for construction of advanced aircraft.

## Believed Based at Nellis

The planes are believed to be based in an isolated and tightly guarded corner of the huge Nellis Air Force Base and Tonopah Test Range, according to a recently published book, "Stealth Aircraft," by British author Bill Sweetman.

Their existence is a closely guarded secret. Both Pentagon and Lockheed have consistently declined all comment on the fighter, refusing to even admit that it exists.

However, the Pentagon has acknowledged that it is working on a stealth bomber, using the same advanced technology. It is being developed by Northrop Corp. in Palmdale and Pico Rivera. The Air Force plans to buy 132 of the bombers, but none has yet flown.

Edwards is the site of the Air Force's principal test center for advanced aircraft, and a wide variety of experimental jets are tested at the base. Test flights are frequently flown between Nellis and Edwards.

At the Pentagon on Friday, high-level Air Force officials said the airplane that crashed in the Sequoia National Forest was not a stealth bomber, but when asked if it was a stealth fighter, they declined comment.

There have been published reports that at least two, and possibly four, Lockheed F-19s have crashed in recent years in the vast expanse of Nellis Air Force Base and the adjacent Tonopah range.

Because the crashes were not witnessed by civilians and none of the pilots were killed, little is known about them.

## Brush Fire Started

However, Friday's crash occurred well outside the tightly secured Nevada base and range complex and started a large brush fire that came quickly to the attention of Kern County and Forest Service firefighters. It also killed the pilot.

County and federal officials told reporters later that they had been ordered by Air Force officers to say nothing of the crash, but at least one Forest Service firefighter told a reporter that he got within a quarter of a mile of the crash site.

"There were no signs of any wreckage," the firefighter said. "It looked like the whole thing must have just burned up. There was just a big black spot on the side of the hill."

About 100 Forest Service and county firefighters fought a 150-acre blaze around the downed plane, containing it at 8 a.m., a Forest Service spokeswoman said.

At about 10 a.m. a convoy of a dozen Air Force vehicles, including a military ambulance, entered the area.

Air Force security guards, armed with M-16s and .45-caliber pistols, blocked access to the area. Reporters and television camera crews who had journeyed up a dirt logging road were not permitted within four miles of the crash site.

## Military Range

Civilian planes were not allowed to fly at less than 8,500 feet above the area. The airspace above the crash site is part of the so-called R2-508 military range, where much of the nation's most advanced aircraft testing is conducted.

It was not clear if the remains of the pilot were found near the plane. Guess declined to respond to questions on whether the pilot had bailed out or gone down with the aircraft.

The secrecy surrounding Friday's crash was reminiscent of an incident in Nevada in May, 1984, when Air Force Lt. Gen. Robert M. Bond, vice commanding officer of the Air Force Systems Command, died in the crash of what the Pentagon said was "an Air Force specially modified test craft."

There was some immediate speculation that Bond was flying a stealth aircraft. However, a few days later, Pentagon sources indicated that the general died in an advanced Soviet MIG fighter being tested at Nellis. The Air Force, at the time, released little information on that accident, including how the United States gained possession of a Soviet fighter.

Eric Malnic reported from Kern County and Ralph Vartabedian from Los Angeles. Times staff writers Michael Seiler in Los Angeles and James Gerstenzang in Washington also contributed to this story.