

AIR FORCE Magazine
January 2005
Aerospace World

F-16 Shells Hit School

Rounds from an Air National Guard F-16 on an evening training mission accidentally struck a New Jersey middle school in November. The F-16 was using New Jersey's Warren Grove training range on Nov. 3 at about 10 p.m. when several 20 mm shells rained down on the school.

The F-16 belongs to the District of Columbia ANG, which flies out of Andrews AFB, Md. The pilot, who had not been identified, immediately notified ground controllers that his gun had discharged.

There were no students in the school at the time. Custodial staff, though present, were uninjured.

Officials could not immediately determine why the school, more than three miles from the military weapons range, was hit. At a hearing Nov. 17, Maj. Gen. David F. Wherley Jr., commanding general of the D.C. National Guard, told lawmakers that preliminary evidence indicated the school was well beyond the gun's effective range when the shots went off.

Investigators are "trying to determine whether it was a system failure or whether it was an actual pull of the trigger for another purpose," said Wherley.

By mid-December, the investigation into whether pilot error or an equipment malfunction was responsible was still ongoing.

AIR FORCE Magazine
February 2005
Aerospace World

Board Faults ANG Pilot

An Air Force accident investigation board determined in December that pilot error and a poorly designed component led to November's incident where 20 mm shells from an Air National Guard F-16 rained down on a New Jersey school.

Part of the problem was a "poorly designed pilot-vehicle interface," according to a news release. The D.C. Guard F-16, flying out of Andrews AFB, Md., was on a nighttime training mission. At the Warren Grove Weapons Range in New Jersey, Maj. Roberto Balzano's gun accidentally discharged.

The pilot's F-16 used the same trigger for both the laser target marker and the gun. While lining up for a strafing run, Balzano "pulled the trigger to laser mark his intended target," the report explained.

This was deemed pilot error, because Balzano had been warned not to use the laser marker during his preflight briefing. He “lost awareness that the aircraft’s gun was selected and armed,” the investigation determined.

Eight rounds hit a school four miles away. Five penetrated the roof. No students were in the school at the time, and no one was injured. (See “Aerospace World: F-16 Shells Hit School,” January, p. 18.)

The investigation also found that “using the same trigger for both laser marking and firing the aircraft’s gun significantly increases the risk of human error.”

In response, aircraft software will be modified to prevent repeats, and the Air Force is changing the tactics used at the Warren Grove range.

“Aircraft at the range will be restricted as to when they can arm weapons, and flight plans will be altered to point weapons toward unpopulated areas,” the release stated.