

AN EVENTFUL WEEKEND IN 1966



Initial collision of the XB-70 and F-104

The network evening news on June 6, 1966, confirmed the tragic news. Two pilots had been killed and two aircraft destroyed, including the experimental XB-70 Valkyrie, in a midair collision that morning over the Mojave Desert. The XB-70, number 62-0207, was the second aircraft in an experimental test program to build a supersonic long-range bomber, perhaps even nuclear or chemical powered. Watching the news reports, I never expected that I, a young lieutenant at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base, would play a key role in understanding how the crash happened.

At the time, the XB-70 was a technological and visual marvel. (The first XB-70 aircraft, number 62-0001, still draws comments of awe and amazement from viewers at the National Museum of the US Air Force.) Consequently, the flight test program attracted far more attention and publicity than expected. After all, the program had been relegated to the exploration of sustained supersonic and related technologies to benefit the US aircraft industry in future developments of military and commercial platforms.

Begun in the mid-1950's, the program was awarded to North American Aviation and was limited to the development and assembly of two XB-70 aircraft. This was in keeping with the prevailing notion that the intercontinental ballistic missile would render manned bombers obsolete. The program would exist as a military effort for less than 3 years before being turned over to the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) to support supersonic transport development.

Despite its very public accomplishments, however, there was still an air of mystery in 1966 about the eventual outcome of the XB-70 program. Consequently, initial details were sketchy about the accident involving the 46th flight of number 62-0207. It turned out that the aircraft had joined up with a flight of four other aircraft after making a sonic boom

test run. The four aircraft—a Navy F-4 Phantom, a T-38 Talon, an F-5A Tiger, and an F-104 Starfighter—as well as the XB-70 Valkyrie, were powered by General Electric (GE) engines. The plan was to fly a racetrack pattern between the Mojave Desert and Barstow, California, while an accompanying Learjet (rumored to belong to Frank Sinatra) obtained still camera and movie film for a GE television commercial. None of this detail was initially publicized. Today, it would probably lead to an embarrassing media frenzy because the tragic result of the commercial-related effort was the loss of two lives and an incredibly expensive advanced test bed.

It was immediately obvious that the F-104 being flown by another XB-70 test pilot, Joe Walker of NASA, had somehow rolled over the tail of number 62-0207, damaging it to the point that control was no longer possible. Walker died at once as his aircraft disintegrated. North American pilot Al White survived a difficult ejection process from the XB-70, with severe internal injuries. But his co-pilot, Air Force Major Carl Cross, on his first indoctrination flight of the XB-70, was never able to eject. No more was announced and I assumed that I, along with the public at large, would read an account in the next week's *Time* or *Newsweek* and see an official explanation months later after the accident investigation was completed and approved.

The following Saturday, some 24 hours after the accident, was a catch-up day in the Foreign Technology Division (FTD) Photo Interpretation Branch office at Wright-Patterson, where I had been elevated to deputy chief owing to the exodus of more senior personnel to Vietnam (where I soon found out I would be headed in 3 months). I received a midmorning call from Mr. Isadore (Ike) Herman, the directorate chief, tasking me to get a team together and to meet a courier coming in that evening from the office of the Secretary of the Air Force. The courier would deliver the film taken by the Learjet involved in the XB-70 filming.

Our task was to assess the available coverage and have the courier, an Air Force colonel, on his way back to the Pentagon Sunday morning with a report on the events leading up to the midair collision. I had no doubt that our available photo interpreters could do the job. They already had the reputation as the best in the nation for aircraft photo analysis. Their reputation explained why the courier was coming to Wright-Patterson.

To my surprise, Mr. Herman left the entire operation to my discretion. First, the call to appear had to be immediately conveyed to the team. (In addition to their skill-related fame, they were equally known for their partying expertise, and it was a Saturday!) The remainder of the day was spent in scouring Wright-Patterson base operations and system program offices for detailed schematics or blueprints of all the aircraft involved in the formation. These would form the basic references for an analysis that would have to be made in clear airspace. The photo laboratory was also alerted to be on the scene for any reproduction that would be required, as it was a given that the original films would have to be preserved in pristine condition.

The colonel arrived on schedule early Saturday evening and our team was waiting. Among the photo interpretation legends on hand were Tom Davis, John Summerfield, Bob Myers, Bob Countryman, and our photogrammetrist Burt Hultz. The film was rapidly reproduced, with frames being selected to “walk through” the entire sequence of events in minute detail.

By the early hours of Sunday morning, the team had performed the necessary analysis to permit them to create a series of drawings depicting the timed spatial relationships of all aircraft in the formation. It was immediately apparent that the F-104 had gradually drifted near the drooping right wingtip of the XB-70, until there was a sudden contact with the tail of the Starfighter, causing it to roll over the tail of the XB-70, taking off both rudders and the stabilizers. There was no indication of any high-risk activity prior to the collision, a topic of obvious concern to the colonel.

At sunup on Sunday, I delivered the original film and a set of drawings with accompanying photo frames to the courier, who headed back to Washington to ready the Pentagon for the Monday press conferences and calls for details. As we went home for some rest that Sunday morning, there was a feeling of pride that we had been able to react so well to the unexpected.

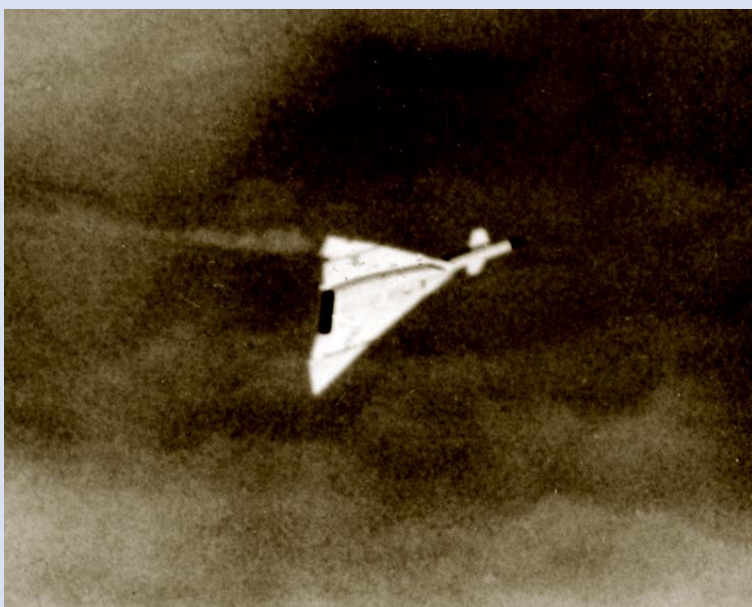
The following week began a lengthy and detailed analysis process, wherein Tom Davis had John Summerfield spend weeks creating scale drawings of the formation sequence to be used as cornerstone data for the Congressional hearings that followed the accident. The ultimate analysis showed that Walker’s F-104 simply got too close to the XB-70 to avoid being drawn into the tremendous vortex created by the huge platform. Once into the position, there was nothing that could have been done to avoid the collision. During this follow-on period, we also had the opportunity to listen to the cockpit voice tapes covering the sequence of events. It was heartrending listening to the aftermath that led to one pilot never being able to eject because he was unable to get through the complicated series of actions necessary to close and eject the individual capsules.

Looking back today, I realize I took several aspects of this event for granted. First and foremost was the faith that Ike Herman and the FTD leadership exhibited in a young lieutenant. Today, I would opine that an event of this significance would involve an entire chain of command with onscene masterminding of a team of senior personnel. I now realize that the ability to display responsibility and ingenuity was a characteristic of the FTD Cold War environment. This was, perhaps, unique within the Intelligence Community and a key element in the creativity that typified our intelligence analyses, and was central to our stature within the national and Department of Defense communities.

Second, it is apparent today that the connectivity to high places that existed for FTD in the rapid growth period following World War II and Korea was unique within the Intelligence Community. This connectivity extended beyond the intelligence world that frequently typifies our framework today and was dependent on the establishment of strong personal ties between FTD seniors and counterparts across all of government.

Third, I now know how I formed my strongly held opinion that military and civilian workforces can coexist and mutually focus on mission accomplishment when the leadership creates an atmosphere of understanding and respect. I was the only military officer involved that day in 1966, and had less experience than anyone. I simply did what I could to organize and support the experts, and mutual trust assured the colonel could go back to the Pentagon on time with what he needed.

Contributor: Mr. Larry Benson



The XB-70 departs controlled flight.



The doomed aircraft shortly before crashing