

Arizona A-10 and Pilot Still Missing [news]

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By MICHELLE BOORSTEIN

PHOENIX (AP) - Guided by tips from sky-gazing citizens, officials hunted by air and land in Colorado for an \$8.8 million Air Force jet that was never supposed to leave southern Arizona.

Several sightings Wednesday near Montrose, Colo., reinforced the idea that the missing A-10 Thunderbolt flew into Colorado, Air Force officials said Sunday. The plane disappeared that afternoon going from its Tucson base to a training run in southwestern Arizona.

Radar data released by Davis-Monthan Air Force Base showed an unidentified plane's steady path northeast before fading near Telluride, Colo., south of Montrose. Hundreds of residents called with credible tips that indicated the plane was the A-10, said Col. Barry Barksdale, commander of the 355th Fighter Wing at Davis-Monthan.

The National Guard, Air Force, Civil Air Patrol and local sheriffs in southwestern Colorado were to continue the search today.

Air Force officials had no explanation why the aircraft and pilot - Capt. David Button - apparently headed in the wrong direction. Barksdale said Button could have become incapacitated from something like a blackout or heart attack and engaged the plane's autopilot.

Button also could have ejected, though officials said the ejection seat would have sent out a homing beacon device. Even if Button did eject, history shows it would not be impossible for the plane to land safely on its own.

The Air Force Museum in Dayton, Ohio, has a display on a 1970 accident in which a plane ejected its pilot after entering a spin, recovered unpiloted and made a belly landing in a snow-covered field near Big Sandy, Mont.

``It's something that's one in a million,'' said base Staff Sgt. Rian Clawson said.

He also refuted various theories, including that someone sabotaged the plane to get its four 500-pound bombs, which were unlikely to explode on impact.

``Anything you can think of has probably been looked at,'' Clawson said. ``But the evidence so far doesn't indicate any of these wild hypotheses, like he was trying to steal it, or he went off to Telluride to go skiing.''

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