

Analysis of Arizona A-10 incident

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From: [withheld by request]
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A-10 Update, the wierdness continues: Well, the story on the A-10 continues to change daily, but a compressed summary is this.

Poor weather in Colorado is hindering the search, but the CAP continues to send up sorties each day. Additionally, the Air Force has at least one C-130 tasked with the search. Virtually all search efforts are now focused on Colorado.

Some eyewitness reports place the A-10 in Colorado, and there was smoke spotted on New York mountain consistent with the flight path--which is a course directly to Denver.

On Tuesday, the AF announced that a U-2 was involved in the search as well. Based on the announcement, it sounded like the U-2 was a plane NASA has rigged with a special high-resolution thermal imager; this same plane is used to map wildfires and such. Probably looking for a fire from a "crashed" plane.

The AF has announced that if the craft is found, the search will be turned over to civilian authorities, most likely the county police agency.

On Wednesday, the AF announced that it was bringing in a criminal investigation team, but didn't suspect criminal involvement.

The "official" speculation is that the pilot became incapacitated and the autopilot guided the plane.

Also on Wednesday, it came out that the plane's course changed at least twice after leaving formation and while enroute to who-knows-what in Colorado. A reported specifically asked if this was normal operation under autopilot flight, and the AF spokesman said it was "unusual."

Commentary: Obviously, the plane isn't still in the air, so it landed or crashed somewhere. Based on the last reported position, the plane could have still made it to NV, UT, CO, NM, or AZ with what little fuel it had left.

Based on additional news reports and witness sightings, the A-10 underwent radical alterations of altitude (a witness in Gila county was buzzed by the A-10 flying low enough to rattle his pick up windows, while the plane clearly passed over mountainous terrains at 7,000-8,000 FT just a hundred miles later.) Typically, autopilots maintain a constant altitude.

The course corrections are also atypical of basic autopilots, which usually hold a specific heading (though more advanced systems support specific waypoints, with changes in headings, as a pilot would normally fly; it's unclear if the A-10 had this, and if it did, why the pilot would program the autopilot with such waypoints.)

Based on the inputs of witnesses and the AF, it certainly appears as though the plane was being operated in a human-controlled manner, even if they say they don't think it was.

We're now a week in to this thing, and still no plane, but lots of questions and inconsistent answers. Some food for thought:

The A-10 is designed to take off and land on short, basically unimproved (graded dirt) runways--even a good dirt road is apparently usable.

Colorado (like Arizona and other mountain regions in the west) has a huge number of abandoned mines. Additionally, there are a number of underground facilities left over from the cold war--some are still in use, but a few no doubt are also unused. There's ample room to hide such a plane given a big-enough man-made cave.

Some of the speculation centers on the four 500lb bombs and terrorist plots--the speculation seems to be almost avoiding the value of the plane. (If there's a plot, it seems hard to believe an organization sophisticated enough to steal this plane would want four comparatively small bombs--it just seems to reason that a plane that could put those bombs anywhere in a 800-mile range would be more attractive.)

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