

Death in a Blink

Things happen quickly when you're traveling at better than 600 miles per hour. Very quickly. The margin of error for the pilot of a Marine Corps F/A-18 Hornet is miniscule. Gary Robert Fullerton of Spartanburg was at the controls of a Hornet attack fighter on July 21, 2004.

Fullerton was a member of Clemson's Class of 1990. After graduation, he reported to Quantico, Virginia for active duty with the Marine Corps. Upon completing his basic officer course there, Fullerton trained to become a Marine Corps fighter pilot and earned his wings.



By 2004, Fullerton was a commercial pilot but he continued to fly fighter jets as a major in the Marine Corps Reserve. He was assigned to squadron VMFA-134 based at the Marine Corps Air Station in Miramar, California. On the afternoon of July 21, Fullerton took off from Portland, Oregon's International Airport on a two-plane training flight. Fullerton was the pilot of a two-seat F/A-18. His passenger on the flight was the squadron maintenance officer, Captain Jeffrey Ross. Major Craig Barden was the pilot of the lead aircraft, a single-seat F/A-18.

The F/A-18 Hornet is a twin-engine, supersonic, all-weather, multirole combat jet. It was designed to operate as both an attack and fighter aircraft. Capable of speeds up to Mach 1.8, the Hornet's normal cruising speed is a more leisurely 660 miles per hour.

Fullerton followed Barden's Hornet toward the Boardman Air Force Range where the two Marine Corps fighters planned to support a training sortie by aircraft from the Oregon Air National Guard. During the flight, air traffic controllers instructed Barden in the lead Hornet to avoid a nearby training range because Air Force jets were operating there. Barden told the controllers that he would descend and turn around for a return to Portland. At operational speeds, the Hornet travels nearly 100 feet in the time it takes to blink. As Barden turned to the right, Fullerton's Hornet collided with its right rear, causing both planes to break apart. Barden ejected safely and suffered injuries to his shoulders and tailbone. Fullerton and Ross also ejected, but both were killed when they landed in the Columbia River about 120 miles east of Portland.

Marine Corps accident investigators found no wrongdoing on the part of the pilots involved in the crash, but General Harold Fruchtnicht, commander of the 4th Marine Aircraft Wing, cited a lax safety culture in the squadron. He noted that procedures to make sure pilots were qualified to fly were not followed and that Captain Ross was not qualified to be aboard the flight. "The only conclusion that I can make is that some factor caused Major Fullerton, a very experienced Marine Corps aviator and commercial pilot, to lose situational awareness as he maneuvered his aircraft near his flight lead, which resulted in the mid-air collision."

Fullerton's squadron commander, Colonel Gary Vaughan, said, "These two very talented young men had offered many years of dedicated service to the protection of the freedoms we all enjoy today."

Major Gary Robert Fullerton was buried in the Fort Rosencrans National Cemetery, San Diego, California.

