

Final Flight

Edward Shokes was surely looking forward to his Friday morning mission. It would be the final familiarization flight Shokes needed to qualify as first pilot in the F9F Cougar. The Cougar, manufactured by Grumman Aviation, was a multi-purpose fighter flown by both the Navy and the Marines. Although designed for carrier operations, this morning's flight was originating from terra firma, Miramar Naval Air Station just north of San Diego.

Lieutenant, junior grade Shokes would be flying with Lieutenant David Blackwood, 27, from Burlington, Iowa. The jet raced down Miramar's runway, lifting off at 0836 for an hour-and-a-half mission. Shokes radioed the base's air traffic control shortly after takeoff to report that "Royal Blue 941," the aircraft's call sign, was on its way. Neither Shokes nor Blackwood was heard from again.

Edward Lee Shokes was an electrical engineering major from Charleston, where his father served as chief of the city's fire department. Shokes was a student assembly representative, a member of Tiger Band, the Freshman Platoon, Pershing Rifles and Senior Platoon. Following his graduation in 1958, he joined the Navy.

By June 1961, Shokes had earned his pilot wings and was assigned to VCP-63, a light photographic reconnaissance squadron providing support to the carrier wings of the Pacific Fleet. Shokes and his wife Janet, who was three months pregnant, were living in San Diego.

At 1048 hours on that Friday morning, Miramar tower reported to the squadron duty officer that Shokes's and Blackwood's flight was overdue. Attempts to contact the overdue fighter were made by base radio and by other squadron aircraft airborne in the area, but with no success. Scores of Navy, Coast Guard and Civil Air Patrol planes began searching an area within the fuel radius of the missing Cougar. The search area included parts of Mexico to the south, Arizona to the east, Las Vegas and Bakersfield to the north and the coastal waters off of southern California to the west. Officials announced on July 5 that the search had been called off after aerial photographs of the area yielded no evidence of a crash site.

Nearly six months passed before prospectors working in the Little San Bernardino mountains some ten miles north of Indio, California discovered aircraft wreckage on a steep mountain slope of a remote canyon. On



December 18, crash investigators arrived at the site. They determined that the aircraft had struck the ground inverted. Shokes had ejected, but his parachute didn't have time to fully open. Blackwood remained in the aircraft. Engine failure was cited as the possible cause of the crash. The smashed clock from the aircraft's instrument panel indicated that the crash had occurred at 0922, forty-six minutes after takeoff.

In 2009, forty-eight years after the accident, Gene Shokes, with the help of aircraft archeologist Trey Brandt, visited the site where his father died.

While we all recognize the hazards faced by the men and women of our armed forces in times of war, it is important to understand that training and operations are underway every day and that these activities include their own dangers.



For additional information, see:

<http://www.aircraftarchaeology.com/f9findio.html>

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