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AIRCRAFT ACCIDENT TO ROYAL AIR FORCE HARRIER T4 XW 272

Date:	29 June 1982
Parent Airfield:	RAF Gutersloh, Germany
Place of Accident:	Bergen Hohne Tactical Range, Germany
Crew:	One
Casualties:	One killed

CIRCUMSTANCES

1. On 29 June 1982, an experienced Harrier pilot flew XW 272 from Gutersloh to a field site, which was already occupied by a small detachment of aircraft and Squadron personnel. On landing, the aircraft was taxied to the hide area situated near to the grass strip. The ground was firm and the pilot had no difficulty in taxiing the aircraft over the grass. The aircraft was handed over to the groundcrew for turnaround servicing whilst the pilot proceeded to the operations caravan. Approximately 1 hour later he returned to his aircraft for the flight back to Gutersloh. He signed the aircraft's servicing certificate and completed the pre-flight inspection. The start up was normal and the pilot then carried out the after start checks which included checking the operation of the flaps. The flaps were then retracted for the taxi-out; this was standard procedure to prevent them being damaged by earth thrown up by the jet efflux.

2. A heavy shower was passing overhead as the aircraft taxied out towards the grass strip. The rain had so softened the grass surface that the pilot had to use large amounts of power to keep the aircraft moving and to prevent the wheels from bogging down. With the noise of the engine rpm varying as the ground conditions changed, the aircraft was lined up on the grass strip. The high power settings were causing large quantities of cut grass and spray to be thrown and this prevented observers from noting the aircraft's configuration. As soon as the aircraft was lined up, the pilot slammed the throttle to full power for a Short Take Off. The aircraft accelerated swiftly down the strip and became airborne as the pilot rotated the engine nozzles. However, the aircraft did not climb higher than about 30 ft and developed a steep altitude of about 30°. The aircraft maintained this altitude and continued forward without significantly increasing speed or height until it crashed into trees at the end of the site. The pilot did not attempt to eject and was killed.

DETERMINATION OF CAUSE

3. The evidence was conclusive that the pilot took off with the flaps retracted. In such a configuration, and with the distance available, the aircraft could not clear the 40 ft high trees at the end of the site. It was not possible to establish why the pilot failed to complete the required checks before take-off, but he may have been preoccupied with the difficulty of manoeuvring the aircraft in the soggy conditions and that may have caused him to forget to lower the flaps.

Issued by - Public Relations (Royal Air Force)
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