AIRCRAFT ACCIDENT TO ROYAL AIR FORCE PHANTOM FGR2 X1908

Date: 9 January 1989
Parent Airfield: RAF Leuchars
Place of Accident: 50nm east of Leuchars
Crew: Two
Casualties: One Fatal

CIRCUMSTANCES

1. On 9 Jan 89, Phantom FGR2 X1908 was taking part in a training sortie, which included practice radar interceptions with another Phantom aircraft. Following a successful intercept, the 2 aircraft positioned for a second one. In the climb to 10,000 ft, and at a position some 80 nautical miles from base, the pilot of X1908 suddenly informed his navigator that he was feeling unwell and would have to return to base.

2. The pilot immediately transmitted an emergency call declaring that he had a "pilot problem" and initiated a turn towards base. He reported to his navigator that he was beginning to lose his vision and was feeling numb.

3. With the assistance of the navigator, who gave verbal attitude and heading instructions, and with the other aircraft alongside, the pilot was able to maintain straight and level flight. However, the pilot then reported further difficulty with his vision and although he responded, in a normal voice, to directions with a simple "yes", his follow-up actions were slow. Then, with the pilot still acknowledging the calls from both the other aircraft and his navigator, the Phantom began to descend with no corrective action being taken. When the navigator called "pull-up" with some urgency, the pilot applied full power and raised the nose of the aircraft smoothly. The aircraft attitude then stabilised, wings level, nose up, but with the speed decaying. Despite calls to lower the nose, the pilot only responded with a hesitant reply and at approximately 9,000 ft the aircraft departed from controlled flight and descended rapidly.

4. From the moment of the departure from controlled flight, the pilot failed to respond to all the calls from his navigator or the crew of the other aircraft and, as the Phantom decended through 4,000 ft, the navigator ejected after informing the pilot of his intentions. The aircraft crashed into the sea and was totally destroyed; the pilot did not eject and was killed.
CAUSE

5. Prior to the sortie, the pilot was reported to be behaving quite normally and in good health. Throughout the first part of the sortie, he appeared perfectly normal and responded to all his navigator's calls. From the moment of the pilot reporting that he was unwell to the point the aircraft crashed, the eye witness accounts of his navigator and the crew of the other aircraft, coupled with a recording of the radio calls, indicated that the cause of the accident to Phantom XT908 was loss of control due to incapacitation of the pilot. The most likely causes of the incapacitation were considered to be heart attack, cardiac arrhythmia (irregular heartbeats) or migraine.

6. Despite a thorough investigation, it was not possible to identify positively the cause of the incapacitation, but the balance of medical opinion, on the evidence available, suggested that the most probable cause was a severe migraine attack.

SUBSEQUENT ACTIONS

7. The requirements for medical assessment of aircrew are being reviewed.