

THE BATTLE OF PALMDALE

By

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A Startling Discovery

While researching aircraft accidents in the Periodicals section of the California State University, Northridge, library, I stumbled across one I had never heard of. The Los Angeles Times headline read, "208 Rockets Fired at Runaway Plane." A subhead continued, "Missiles Spray Southland Area in Effort to Halt Wild Drone." The story described terrified residents, property damage and forest fires caused by rocket bombardment of a wide area of northern Los Angeles County as Air Force jet crews attempted to shoot down a runaway Navy drone airplane.

Retired Warhorse

The Grumman F6F *Hellcat* was one of the most successful fighter aircraft of the Second World War. Simple and rugged, it was built to absorb a great deal of punishment. It was easy to fly and well armed. The Grumman factory produced over 12,000 *Hellcats* between 1942 and 1945.

After the war, *Hellcats* were sold to France and Uruguay. Some remained in service with U.S. Naval Reserve and training units. In 1946, a drone version designated F6F-5K participated in Operation Crossroads atomic weapons tests at Bikini atoll. Other *Hellcats* served as targets for missile tests at Naval Air Station Point Mugu, California.

Runaway

But one *Hellcat* drone was slated to end its career in a blaze of unintended glory over California's Mojave Desert.

On the morning of August 16, 1956, Navy personnel at Point Mugu prepared an F6F-5K for its final mission. The aircraft had been painted red for high-visibility. Red and yellow camera pods were mounted on the wingtips. Radio remote control systems were checked, and the *Hellcat* took off at 11:34 a.m., climbing out over the Pacific Ocean. As ground controllers attempted to maneuver the drone toward the target area, it became apparent that it was not responding to radio commands. They had a runaway. Ahead of the unguided drone lay thousands of square miles of ocean into which it could crash. Instead, the old *Hellcat* made a graceful climbing turn to the southeast, toward the city of Los Angeles. With the threat of a runaway aircraft approaching a major metropolitan area, imminent the Navy called for help.

Five miles north of NAS Point Mugu, two F-89D *Scorpion* twinjet interceptors of the 437th Fighter Interceptor Squadron were scrambled from Oxnard Air Force Base. The crews were ordered to shoot down the rogue drone before it could do any damage. Armed with wingtip-mounted rocket pods and no cannon, the *Scorpion* embodied the typical U.S. approach to countering the "Red Menace" of the Cold War era. Each pod contained 52 *Mighty Mouse* 2.75-inch rockets. Salvo-launched, the *Mighty Mouse* did not require precision guidance capabilities. Large numbers of rockets would be fired into approaching Soviet bomber formations to overwhelm them through sheer numbers. Today, however, they would be used against an altogether different kind of red menace. At Oxnard Air Force Base, 1st Lt. Hans Einstein and his radar observer, 1st Lt. C. D. Murray, leapt into their sleek F-89D.

Simultaneously, 1st Lt. Richard Hurliman and 1st Lt. Walter Hale climbed into a second aircraft. The interceptors roared south after their target. The hunt was on.

Intercept

Einstein and Hurliman caught up with the *Hellcat* at 30,000 feet, northeast of Los Angeles. It first turned southwest, crossing over the city, then headed northwest. As the *Hellcat* circled lazily over the quiet Ventura County hamlet of Santa Paula, the interceptor crews waited impatiently. As soon as it passed over an unpopulated area, they would fire their rockets.

The interceptor crews discussed their options. There were two methods of attack using the fire control system, either from a wings-level attitude or while in a turn. Since the drone was turning almost continuously, they opted for the latter. But in repeated attempts, the rockets failed to fire during these maneuvers, a malfunction later traced to a design flaw. The drone then turned northeast, passing over Fillmore and Frazier Park. It appeared to be heading toward the Antelope Valley's sparsely populated western end when suddenly, it again turned southeast toward Los Angeles. Time seemed to be running out. Einstein and Hurliman decided to abandon the automatic modes, and fire manually. Although the aircraft had been delivered with gun sights, these had been removed a month earlier. After all, why would a pilot need a gun sight to fire unguided rockets with an automatic fire control system?

Rocket Attack

The interceptors made their first attack run as the *Hellcat* crossed the mountains near Castaic. Murray and Hale set their intervalometers to "ripple fire" the rockets in three salvos. The first crew lined up their target and fired, missing it completely. The second interceptor unleashed a salvo that passed just below the drone. Rockets blazed through the sky and then plunged earthward to spark brush fires seven miles north of Castaic. The fires decimated 150 acres above the old Ridge Route, near Bouquet Canyon.

A second salvo from the two jets also missed the drone, raining rockets near the town of Newhall. One bounced across the ground, leaving a string of fires in its wake between the Oak of the Golden

Dream Park and the Placerita Canyon oilfield. The fires ignited several oil sumps and burned 100 acres of brush. The blazes raged out of control, threatening the nearby Bermite Powder Company explosives plant. The rockets also ignited a fire in the vicinity of Soledad Canyon, west of Mt. Gleason, burning over 350 acres of heavy brush.

Meanwhile, the errant drone meandered north toward Palmdale. The *Scorpion* crews readjusted their intervalometers and each fired a final salvo, expending their remaining rockets. Again, the obsolete, unpiloted, unguided, unarmed, propeller-driven drone evaded the state-of-the-art jet interceptors. In all, the jet crews fired 208 rockets without scoring a single hit.

The afternoon calm was shattered as *Mighty Mouse* rockets fell on downtown Palmdale. Edna Carlson was at home with her six-year-old son William when a chunk of shrapnel burst through her front window, bounced off the ceiling, pierced a wall, and finally came to rest in a pantry cupboard. Another fragment passed through J. R. Hingle's garage and home, nearly hitting Mrs. Lilly Willingham as she sat on the couch. A Leona Valley teenager, Larry Kempton, was driving west on Palmdale Boulevard with his mother in the passenger seat when a rocket exploded on the street in front of him. Fragments blew out his left front tire, and put numerous holes in the radiator, hood, windshield and even the firewall. Miraculously, no one was injured by any of the falling rockets. Explosive Ordnance Disposal teams from nearby Edwards Air Force Base later recovered 13 duds in the vicinity of Palmdale. It took 500 firefighters two days to bring the various brushfires under control.

An Ignominious End

Oblivious to the destruction in its wake, the drone passed over the town. Its engine sputtered and died as the fuel supply dwindled. The red *Hellcat* descended in a loose spiral toward an unpopulated patch of desert eight miles east of Palmdale Airport. Just before impact, the drone sliced through a set of three Southern California Edison power lines along an unpaved section of Avenue P. The camera pod on the airplane's right wingtip dug into the sand and the *Hellcat* cartwheeled and disintegrated. There was no fire.

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Finding the Site

On July 5, 1997, I searched for the crash site with a colleague, Tony Moore. Using information from old newspaper articles, we identified our search area. When we arrived, we followed the power lines to the location that had been described and immediately spotted aircraft debris.

It soon became apparent that the pieces belonged to a relatively small, propeller-driven airplane. Some of the pieces had part numbers and Grumman inspection stamps. Fragments of exterior skin were painted red, just as the drone *Hellcat* had been. There were numerous data plates from various components. We also found items from the cockpit and parts of the right camera pod. There was no question that we had found the crash site of the F6F-5K.

The wreckage is all that remains to commemorate

the day that an unarmed, unmanned, and obsolete prop-driven plane eluded two of America's most advanced jet interceptors. Looking at wreckage scattered in this as yet undeveloped section of the Antelope Valley, I couldn't help but wonder how the incident affected the careers of the various participants of the "Battle of Palmdale." Navy officials at Point Mugu must have initially felt embarrassed, having to ask the Air Force for help in shooting down the runaway drone. Later, they may have felt relief that Navy pilots were not to blame for the ensuing debacle. The interceptor pilots, on the other hand, must have watched their egos deflate as fast as their rockets were ineffectively expended over the communities of southern California. Bombing taxpayers doesn't foster community support or win promotions for junior officers. Only the fact that no lives were lost prevented this comedy of errors from becoming a tragedy.

Editors note:

The Spring 2004 issue of the China Laker lead article was Harold H. Patton's article titled, "The Mighty Mouse in History. Patton lead the China Lake team that resulted in the weapon described in the Battle of Palmdale. This project, a major effort in Code 40 (later the Weapons Development Department) brought Mighty Mouse to mass production.

Quoting from Patton's article:

"In the late 1950s the F-86D, F-89D and F-94C interceptors served as the main air defense against Soviet bomber attacks. In retrospect, the threat was proven grossly exaggerated but it cannot be denied that the presence of these aircraft was an important deterrent."

Later, he continues:

"The first F89D Scorpions, after extensive factory rework, became operational with the 18th Fighter Interceptor Squadron in January 1954. A total of 682 F-89Ds were accepted, but 350 were modified as F-89Js. 30 of 39 squadron were based in the US or Canada. F-89D squadrons also served in Labrador and the 57th "Black Knights" Squadron in Iceland. Many installations featured car-port-like hangers aligned with a runway with flight-ready aircraft, and attached flight crew quarters ready for instant response to early warning."

Finally, Patton concluded his article with the following statement:

"China Lake can be proud that our concept making an advantage of the natural dispersion of unguided rockets in the "shotgun" principle which employed a rapidly fired cluster of rockets, any one of which had been demonstrated to be capable of disabling a strategic bomber. It is a tribute to our reputation for analysis, design, test and evaluation that the defense establishment accepted the US Navy's 2.75-inch Mighty Mouse for this crucial mission.