

# Pelican receives blame for B-1B bomber crash

## Air Force officials say bird crashed into

WASHINGTON (AP) — A B-1B bomber that left Dyess Air Force Base in Abilene and crashed in Colorado in September probably struck a lone pelican that smashed through a wing like a "bowling ball," setting off a fire that quickly doomed the plane, the Air Force said Wednesday.

Two of the victims were not in ejection seats and did not have time to bail out manually. The third crewman, the co-pilot, died because his ejection seat malfunctioned, the accident investigation report said.

The bomber probably could have survived if the pelican had struck an engine or been pulled into one. But Gen. James W. Meier, Strategic Air Command assistant director of operations, said at a Pentagon briefing that the bird apparently struck with great force in a critical area, setting off the fire.

The pelican struck the underside of the wing just above the engine housings on the right side of the plane, which was flying about 600 feet above the ground. The plane was moving at such a high speed — 640 miles per hour — that the bird's body tore through the aluminum skin into the wing, ripping apart critical hydraulic and fuel lines.

"What we believe happened in this was an extremely unlucky penetration of an area that produced a

fire that subsequently burned through a sufficient number of hydraulic lines" so that the plane became unflyable, Meier said.

"The mass of that bird is like a bowling ball operating at the speed of sound," he said. "It's a large, large projectile."

The 3-inch-thick accident report presents a detailed chronology and probable cause based on interviews with three surviving crew members, examination of the crash debris, experiments with B-1B simulators and reports from witnesses on the ground.

It does not offer a precise explanation as to why the co-pilot's ejection seat failed to operate. Rather, it suggests there was a malfunction involving some switching devices within the automatic ejection system that left the co-pilot's seat in the plane after his hatch had been blown clear.

Meier suggested the system could have been damaged accidentally during maintenance. Some modifications are being made to the ejection systems on all the B-1Bs, Meier said.

The Air Force said Wednesday it would spend \$62.5 million this year strengthening certain sections of the plane to better withstand bird strikes, including the wing section

above the engines. The modifications would spend another \$100 million on the modifications to the tail section.

Meier said B-1Bs will undergo some low-level, high-speed flights until each aircraft is modified. Low-level flights resume this spring, but it will take time to train as they normally do.

The general defense and survivability of the B-1B planes, describing the bird that knocked out three of the four hydraulic systems.

The Sept. 28 crash occurred over a bomber base near La Junta, Colo., was a production-model B-1B, the new strategic bomber being developed by the United States in more than

From the beginning, officials made clear the plane involved a bird strike. Initial reports, however, Force investigators said a bomber struck a single bird flock — and that it was an American white pelican weighing up to 20 pounds. The B-1B is designed to withstand strikes weighing up to six pounds.

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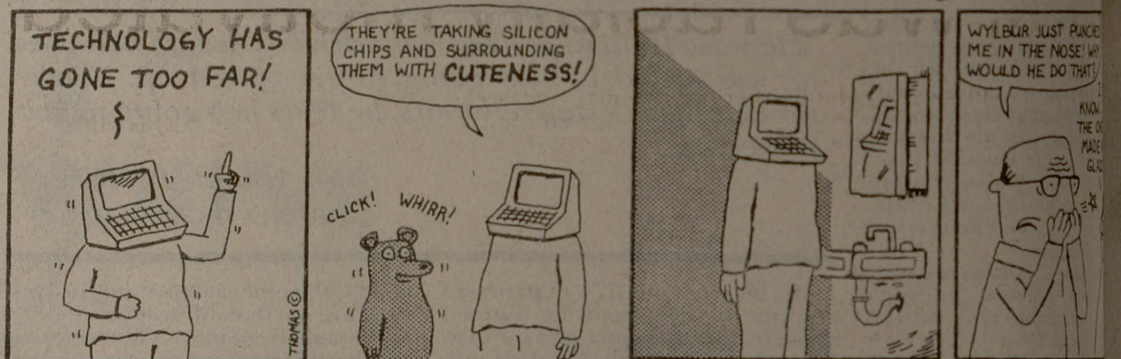
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