

American Bomber on Combat Mission Crashes on Army Post in Phnom Penh

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PHNOM PENH, Cambodia, May 4—A United States fighter-bomber on an air-strike mission in support of the Cambodian Army crashed into a military post near Phnom Penh's Pochentong airport today.

This was the second known crash or downing of an American fighter-bomber in Cambodia since the Vietnam cease-fire accord was signed in Paris on Jan. 27. An observation plane has also been reported lost.

Two bodies could be seen among the wreckage—that of a boy who looked about 10 years old and a girl about 5 or 6. Several more people, civilians and soldiers, were said by eyewitnesses to be missing in the acre of burning debris.

[At least 20 people on the ground were killed and some 40 wounded, Reuters reported from Phnom Penh.]

A Pilot Ejects

The eyewitnesses said a pilot ejected from the plane by parachute before the crash and landed about 100 yards away. He was said to have suffered minor injuries and was whisked away quickly to Phnom Penh in an ambulance. Later he was flown to Thailand for treatment.

There was uncertainty as to whether a second pilot was in the plane and, if so, what had happened to him.

The cause of the crash was not immediately known, but because of the combat nature of the air missions here, there was speculation that the plane might have been hit by enemy ground fire.

The scene at the crash site was chaotic. The plane came down only about 300 yards from the end of the runway of the civilian airport, which indicated that it had been trying to land there. The airport is

about seven miles from downtown Phnom Penh.

The plane crashed into a storehouse in the middle of a military post that houses a battalion of Cambodian demolition engineers, or sappers. Many of the soldiers' families live with them on the base, and two families were said to have been inside the storehouse when the plane hit.

Whether any soldiers were inside was not immediately known, but it seemed clear from the destruction that no one in the building could have survived.

Although American aircraft have not resumed bombing in Vietnam, they have done so in both Laos and Cambodia in response to Communist military activity.

In Cambodia, primarily because of enemy pressure on Phnom Penh, the capital, the Americans have for the last two months been conducting the heaviest bombing ever carried out in this nation and some of the heaviest of the entire Indochina war.

Fighter-bombers from bases in Thailand and long-range B-52's from Thailand and Guam have been carrying out a daily average of about 250 sorties (a sortie is one mission by one plane). The raids are coordinated and sometimes directed by a command post at the United States Embassy in Phnom Penh.

Almost nothing could be

learned about the crash except that the plane was an American fighter-bomber and that it came down about 5 P.M. The American Embassy refused any immediate comment.

However, newsmen who reached embassy officials privately said they were told the plane was an A-7 Corsair. The A-7's usually fly from aircraft carriers, but there was no information on what carrier this plane might have come from nor on the nature of its mission. One unconfirmed report said the plane had been conducting strikes on enemy targets about 15 miles northwest of Phnom Penh.

The United States embassy here has been refusing to give out any specific information on the bombing, suggesting to reporters that they submit their questions to Washington.

The rubble was still burning two hours after the crash. Soldiers reported that there had been six big explosions after the plane hit. It was not clear whether these were bombs carried by the plane or simply explosions of ammunition that had been kept in the storehouse.

When the first three fire-trucks ran out of water and raced back to Phnom Penh for more, soldiers from the engineering battalion kept trying to put out the fire with a bucket brigade as scattered ammunition exploded occasionally around them.