

Searchers fail to find Fresno Air Guard pilot

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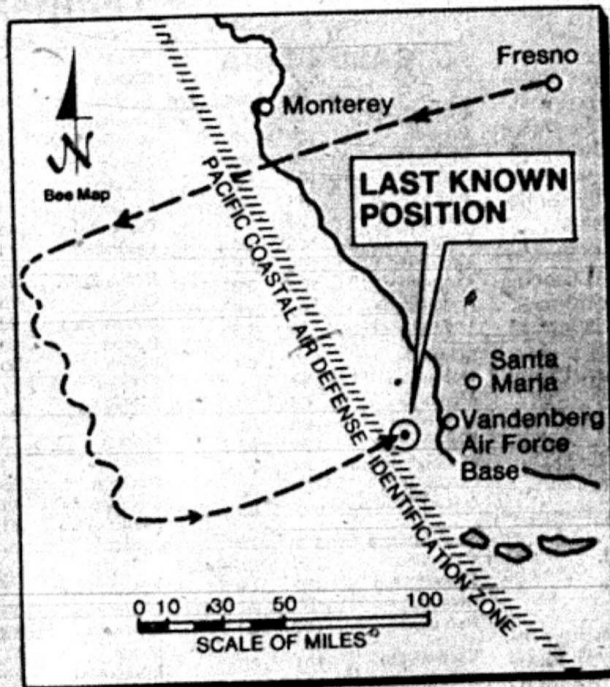
VANDENBERG AIR FORCE BASE — An all-day search off the Southern California coast Wednesday found no trace of a missing Fresno Air National Guard pilot or his T-33 jet.

Capt. Thomas W. Fishburn Jr., 35, of Lemoore was alone in the two-seat utility plane when it vanished from radar contact Tuesday night 15 miles off Vandenberg Air Force Base near Santa Maria.

Air Guard officials said Fishburn was returning from an offshore mission in which his T-33 had been the radar target in a North American Aerospace Defense Command exercise. Such exercises are routine for Air Guard planes from the Fresno Air Terminal.

The search for Fishburn was conducted by the U.S. Coast Guard and coordinated by the Air Force Rescue Center at Scott Air Force Base in Illinois. But morning and evening fog limited the efforts of search helicopters and ships.

Fishburn was nearing the coast at 22,000 feet when he was instructed by a controller at Luke Air Force



CAPT. THOMAS FISHBURN

Base, Phoenix, Ariz., to contact the Federal Aviation Administration's Los Angeles Air Traffic Control center for routine clearance back to the Fresno Air Terminal.

That radio contact was never made.

The last radio message from Fishburn was a "calm, normal

transmission," said Lt. Col. Bernard Hollenbeck, chief of aircrew evaluation and standardization for the 144th Fighter-Interceptor Wing.

Fishburn's T-33 was equipped with a life raft and parachute, Hollenbeck said, and the pilot had a flotation vest and other ocean survival equipment. He said

Fishburn, who flew with the U.S. Navy as an Air Force liaison officer from 1978 to 1980, was trained in emergency ocean survival techniques.

"If he's in the raft, we'll get him," Hollenbeck said.

Fishburn graduated from the U.S. Air Force Academy in 1970. He served on active duty as a military pilot until 1980 and flew a variety of aircraft, including Navy A-4 and A-7 carrier-based attack jets. He joined the Fresno Air Guard unit as a pilot in March 1981.

Fishburn is a stockbroker in Fresno. He is married and the father of two children.

His 1953-model T-33 is one of many still used by Air Force and Air Guard units and is considered by pilots to be a reliable utility plane, Hollenbeck said.

"I don't think there's any of us who have any doubts about the integrity of the aircraft," Hollenbeck said.

Last November, a Fresno-based T-33 crashed into a mountain near Comox, British Columbia, shortly after taking off. Investigators

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blamed the crash on a misunderstanding between the pilot, who was killed, and an air traffic controller at Comox.

Air Guard officials said that missions such as Fishburn's are conducted almost entirely over the Pacific, usually about 100 miles off the California coast. The planes are electronically intercepted and take evasive action. No missiles or guns are fired.

Because the subsonic T-33 can't be refueled in the air, their missions don't last much longer than two hours. Referred to as a "T-Bird," the T-33 is a two-seat version of the F-80, one of the nation's earliest jet fighters.

After taking off from Fresno, Fishburn flew his T-33 across the San Joaquin Valley and crossed the coast at Big Sur, Air Guard officials said. Reaching a point about 100 miles offshore, he turned and flew parallel to the coastline toward Los Angeles.

Coincidentally, Vandenberg had been scheduled to conduct a practice exercise Wednesday involving a search for a missing plane, a base spokesman said.