

Air Force, Guard Planes Hunt Off Cambria For Fresno Pilot

Air Force and Coast Guard planes continued their search of the Pacific southwest of Cambria today for a Fresno jet pilot missing since the collision yesterday of two Air National Guard interceptors.

He is Lt. Col. Ronald L. Pearson, 40, missing since early yesterday when his F102 Delta Dagger collided with another flown by Maj. James H. Estep, 36, also of Fresno.

Estep was plucked from the ocean by a Coast Guard helicopter after spending about three hours in a raft and flown to Vandenberg Air Force Base hospital for treatment of minor injuries. He was to return to Fresno this afternoon.

Search planes scoured the area of the accident through the day yesterday and last night for



Lt. Col. Ronald L. Pearson



Maj. James H. Estep

See Jet Pilot Page 4-A

Jet Pilot: Planes Search Off Cambria

From Page 1-A

Pearson and were to continue criss-crossing the area at least through tonight.

The veteran pilots, members of the 144th Fighter Interceptor Group based at the Fresno Air Terminal, were on a practice intercept mission with three other pilots in the delta-wing, supersonic F102s when the collision occurred at 10:36 a.m. yesterday.

Estep was flying the target plane as the others made radar intercept passes at his jet. They were flying at an altitude of

about 25,000 feet some 30 miles southwest of San Luis Obispo.

Estep said he ejected immediately after his plane was sliced in two by Pearson's jet, and floated down to the ocean in a parachute. He said he spent about three hours in the "freezing" water, first in his own small personal equipment raft, then in a larger one dropped to him from a Coast Guard plane.

All his equipment worked perfectly, he said, including the radio "beeper" which sent out radio signals to his rescuers. The "beeper" turned on automatically when his parachute

opened.

Estep, the fighter group's flying safety officer, was picked up by a Coast Guard helicopter. His only injuries, he said, are a cut on the chin and singed eyebrows.

The search mission for Pearson today was being conducted by two Air Force C130 Hercules transports and two Coast Guard planes and a Coast Guard helicopter.

Both Estep and Pearson, in civilian life a pilot for Pan American World Airways, are veteran pilots, Estep with more than 2,000 hours of flying time,

Pearson with more than 3,000 hours.

An accident board made up of some 10 Air Force officers from higher commands was to begin investigating the collision today.

The accident was only the second major one for the local Air Guard unit since it began flying the Delta Daggers in 1964. The other one also occurred over the Pacific near Monterey in April 1968. The pilot ejected safely from the disabled plane.

The unit has had only two fatal accidents since it began operating in Fresno in 1954.