

The Moscow Module

For many years photos of an F-111 escape module have circulated. They include one that seems to obviously be at its landing site in a tropical setting with two Vietnamese appearing women shown in the photo.

Another photo shows the module in a nose up attitude, with a view of the starboard side with a severely shattered windscreen. In this photo a building and foliage can be seen in the background, and to me, having visited Vietnam on several occasions in the past 5 years, seems to have been taken in Hanoi. The windows on the building are very typical of the French colonial architecture of Hanoi. This photo is reported to have been given to JCSD-Moscow on 27 November 1996 by Gen. Col. Anatoliy Ivanovich Khypinen. The General said the photo was given to him by the North Vietnamese when he served in North Vietnam as a senior military advisor from 1972 until 1975.¹ The General did not know who took the photo or when it was taken. He commented that he believed the crew survived the crash. Both of these photos seem to have been taken in Vietnam.

Sometime after 1996 while conducting research on Library of Congress files on three F-111 losses I found references to an F-111 module that was reported to be in the Moscow Institute of Aviation. Through back channel connections I tried to obtain data from that module, such the latitude and longitude counter readings for the present position and target coordinates. I assumed that if they had not been changed after the ejection, they would provide valuable information toward identifying the aircraft and crew. The contact was not willing to risk obtaining this data, and to my knowledge it is not known to this day.

I then filed a Freedom of Information Act request with the Department of Defense, seeking whatever information was available about this Moscow module, including a specific request for the lat-lon readings.

The DoD responded with photos and a brief report. They said the module had been inspected and photographed by two FBI agents who were dispatched to Moscow. The photos show interesting details of the module. On the starboard side, below the canopy rail, the name of the WSO is clearly visible. It reads "W.S.O. MAJ. D. PRIMAS". On the port side is stenciled "Pilot" but the name has been removed. Below that it says "CREW CHIEF SSGT HET_ICK", with the fourth letter unreadable. Elsewhere on the module is a partial identification of the aircraft: "F-111A NO.67-06_A"

Three F-111As in the serial number range from 67-060 through 67-069 were lost. They were:

67-063 Lost 7 Nov '72 Crewed by Robert Brown and Robert Morrissey, refno 1945
67-066 Lost 16 Oct '72 Crewed by Hockridge and Graham; ref no 1939
67-068 Lost 22 Dec '72 Crewed by Capt. Robert Sponeybarger and 1Lt. William Wilson; ref no 1966

Of these 6 men, only Capt. Sponeybarger and 1Lt. Wilson returned, having ejected, been captured and held in the Hoa Lo Prison until Operation Homecoming.

The DoD's response to the FOIA request on the Moscow Module included a report from the FBI. This report described their attempts to identify the aircraft from which the module came as follows:

FEDERAL BUREAU OF INVESTIGATION
WASHINGTON, DC 20535

Date June 18, 1,993

To: Mr. Robert R. Sheetz
Director
Special Office For Prisoners
of war and Missing in Action
Defense Intelligence Agency
Washington, D.C 20340

FBI File No.95A-HQ-1045752

Lab No. 30528015 P YI

Reference: Communication dated May 28, 1993

Your No. 95A-HQ-1045752
Re: POW-MIA MATTER

Specimens received: May 28, 1993

Specimens:

K3 Stencil with 67-068A
K4 Stencil with 67-063A
KS Stencil With 67-066A
K6 Piece of aircraft aluminum with 67-068A stenciled on it
K7 Piece of aircraft aluminum with 67-063A stenciled on it
K8 Piece of aircraft aluminum with 67-066A stenciled on it

Enclosures (8)

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Result of examination:

An F111A crew capsule was examined and photographed on-site at the Moscow Aviation Institute, Moscow, Russia. It was noted that the left side panel containing the questioned number was not attached to the crew capsule.

Two Identification/parts number plates were located on the left interior frame of the crew capsule. These plates were covered by a pliable gray substance. The gray substance was removed and the plates photographed. While removing the gray substance two lines of handprinted numbers and letters were located to the right of the first plate. One additional set of handprinted letters and numbers was located to the left of the first plate. The two sets of handprinted lettering were photographed.

The first plate was white with black lettering. The lettering is as follows, with unidentifiable letters or numbers indicated by an underscore.

HATCH_SS
MFR PART NO. 12K3070-831
MFR SERIAL NO.
WEIGHT
FEDERAL STOCK No.
MFR BY MCDONNELL
GD/FW. SPEC NO.
U.S.
12N_ _

The two lines of white handprinted letters and numbers to the right of the first plate most closely represent the following:

12K3070 4115
F111A 113

The second plate was located to the right of the first plate. It had severe damage. The lettering most closely represents the following:

12K3070_ 31
NO.
NO. M2- 8
MAC
—

The white handprinted numbers and letters located to the left of the first plate are as follows:

XC6187

The crew capsule left side panel was examined and photographed at the US Embassy in Moscow. The interior side of the side panel had the following numbers and letters imprinted on it.

12K 2258 7

The interior side of the side panel also had a block type stamp imprinted on it. The stamp had three separate blocks within it. The third block had two lines stamped on it. Those two lines most closely represent the following:

MAC
2390

The questioned number in the sequence "NO.067-06_A" on the exterior side of the side panel was examined and photographed using a number of forensic techniques. These examinations eliminated the number three "3" as being the questioned number.

An examination of the resultant photographs at the FBI Laboratory in Washington D.C. has determined the questioned number to be eight "8". The sequence reads "No. 67-068A".

The K3 through K8 stencils and aircraft outer shell used for comparative purposes along with copies of the photographs generated during these examinations are returned herewith.

Page 3 End of Document

The above document concludes that the module is that of the Sponeybarger and Wilson F-111A. It describes the method of making this determination as "forensic techniques" which were apparently applied to reproductions of stenciled numbers on a series of aluminum panels. The cover letter also commented on the fact that neither Major Primas or SSGT. Het_ick, whose names were stenciled on the module, "were in the aircraft when it was shot down, nor were they ever unaccounted for." Although the "forensic techniques" were not described they may be valid, however the conclusion that the module was from 67-068 was certainly the easy choice since the crew of Sponeybarger and Wilson was returned.

In an effort to examine all the possibilities, I contacted Major Primas and interviewed him by telephone. He explained that he was never in Vietnam, and that his name was applied to an F-111 while he was stationed at Nellis AFB Nevada. He did not recall the specific airframe that his name was on, but he did recall that the pilot whose name appeared on the opposite canopy rail was "Col. Anderson".

I then contacted Capt. Bill Wilson to ask if he recalled the aircraft serial number of the F-111A they were flying the night they ejected. He said he did not, that they took whatever aircraft was "up" and assigned to them. Nor did he recall whose name was on the side, or if the name was "Major D. Primas".

I have attempted to contact "SSGT Het_ick", making a guess as to the missing letter, and speculating that it could be the letter "r". I have called approximately 10 men named Hetrick, who I identified on the internet. None served in the Air Force.

While having lunch with Col. Jack Broughton in December 2002, we discussed his friend Ed Palmgren who was lost in F-111A 66-024 on 22 April 1968. Col. Broughton mentioned that he and Ed Palmgren flew together in the Thunderbirds, and recalled another of his friends who was a Thunderbird wingman, a Col. Anderson. I contacted Col. Robert D. Anderson in January 2003. He explained that he was CO of the F-111A "Constant Guard" deployment to Southeast Asia in 1972, and that his name was in fact on the opposite side of the module of an F-111A along with Major Primas' name. In fact, one hour before Sponeybarger and Wilson hit their target in Hanoi on the night they ejected, Col. Anderson bombed the same target. Unfortunately Col. Anderson did not recall the serial number of the aircraft having his name stenciled on its side. Nor did he recall crew chief "Het_ick."

The fate of all but one of the lost F-111 crews remains unknown. The Department of Defense has closed many cases, having excavated aircraft parts from various crash sites. Many of their identifications seem to be based on circumstantial evidence, rather than because the JTF-FA has discovered identifiable remains. Stories have circulated for years that F-111 crews were specifically targeted by the North Vietnamese, and that some were captured and became guests of the former Soviet Union. To my knowledge, only the remains of Col. Bill Coltman and his WSO Robert Brett have been positively identified.

One story that has appeared in print ("Inside Hanoi's Secret Archives" by Malcolm McConnell and Theodore Schweitzer III) was that the North Vietnamese government released a photograph to Schweitzer, showing the undamaged contents of an F-111 escape module. Shown in the photo are kneeboards, charts, checklists, survival equipment, flares, a flashlight, and a parachute. There was no evidence of fire or water damage and the items were in pristine condition. Schweitzer's initial thought was that these were the contents of the Sponeybarger-Wilson module. However, on the back of the photo the date "18-12-72 F-111A 233". This date correlated to the 18 December 1972 loss of an F-111A flown by Lt. Col. Ronald Ward and Major James McElvain. Ward and McElvain's target was the Hanoi International Radio complex on the first night of the Linebacker II raids. Using call sign "Snug 40" they called off-target at 8:53 PM. Although another radio transmission was made by Snug 40, and the airborne controller

reported them being “feet wet”, a later review was unable to determine if they had actually crossed the shoreline or had reported the intention to do so. The book reports that the Vietnamese later provided a photo to the DIA showing the body of Major McElvain in a coffin. Apparently they did eject and reached the ground safely, only to be killed by their captors. If this story is true, and I have not yet attempted to obtain the POW-MIA file on their loss, then it is evidence that at least one crew besides Sponeybarger and Wilson survived the loss of their aircraft.

In reading the FBI report on the Moscow Module, the mention of “handprinted letters and numbers” caught my attention. One was “F111A 113”. What did the “113” signify? Certainly not the 113th F-111 claimed by the Vietnamese, as there were only 9 lost on combat missions, and not the 113th aircraft claimed by them, for by this time in the war the US had lost many hundreds of aircraft. The notes on the back of the photo reported to be of the Ward-McElvain equipment included the number “233”, however they were lost 4 nights before Sponeybarger and Wilson.

The other reference of interest was “XC6187”. Both Operational Navigation Charts (ONC) and Tactical Pilotage Charts (TPC) are divided by latitude-longitude coordinates, and by Universal Transverse Mercator Grids (UTMs). Through research on other F-111 losses I knew that the “XC” grid was in Southeast Asia, and that all lettered grids were 100,000 meters per side and were further divided with 10 tick marks, each representing 10,000 meter segments. Therefore a reference to coordinate “XC6187” would be correct for either chart. A review of TPC J-11D shows coordinate XC6187 to be in Laos, some 50 nautical miles south of the 17th parallel (the border of North and South Vietnam), and less than 20 miles from the Vietnam border. Such a location is very close to known ingress routes for F-111s on strike missions from Taklhi to Route Pak 1. Could this hand painted reference be the location where the module was found by the Vietnamese or Laos? Did the flight plan of any of the missing F-111s take them over this location?

The Moscow module could only have been from one of the Constant Guard losses in 1972 since the names were painted on the aircraft while at Nellis during the time Major Primas and Col. Anderson were there, and they were not part of the 1967-8 pre-deployment workup called “Harvest Reaper”. Therefore the module has to be from one of the following:

67-063	Brown-Morrissey
67-066	Hockridge-Graham
67-068	Sponeybarger-Wilson
67-078	Coltman-Brett
67-092	Stafford-Caffereli

Questions:

Does anyone know a 1970-1972 F-111 crew chief named SSGT. Het_ick?

Can anyone identify GDFW (more likely McDonnald-Douglas) part number 12K3070?

Can anyone identify the flight plan for any of the 5 aircraft listed above?

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