

Battle of Palmdale

Palmdale is one of few Southern California communities to have suffered through an air-launched rocket attack. Though inadvertent, the attack came in the summer of 1956 when U.S. Air Force fighters were scrambled to shoot down an out-of-control Navy drone that threatened to fall on Los Angeles. Instead of downing the drone, a pair of Air Force fighter-interceptors blasted holes in the desert from Castaic to Palmdale, starting fires, damaging homes and perforating a station wagon rolling along Palmdale Boulevard. None of the 208 unguided Mighty Mouse air-to-air rockets fired by the interceptors hit their target.. Instead, the drone eventually ran out of fuel and crashed of its own accord near Avenue P and 110th Street East after snipping three power lines.

Aerospace archaeologist Peter Merlin, born after the incident, offered an account of the 47-year-old misadventure. "Following World War II, a number of Grumman F6F Hellcats were converted to target drones," Merlin said. "On Aug. 16, 1956, one of these radio-controlled Hellcats was launched by the Navy from Point Mugu as a target for a missile test.

"The Hellcat took off at 11:34 a.m., climbing out over the Pacific. As controllers attempted to maneuver the drone toward the target area over the ocean, they realized it was not responding to radio commands," Merlin said. The drone had thousands of square miles of ocean in which to crash, but instead, "it made a graceful climbing left-hand turn to the southeast, toward Los Angeles," he said.

With the runaway aircraft headed for a major metropolitan area, the Navy called the Air Force for assistance. At the time, Oxnard Air Force Base was five miles from the Navy's Point Mugu facility. "It must have sorely tested Navy pride to ask the Air Force to bail them out of an embarrassing situation," Merlin opined. "No doubt the Air Force's alert crews were aching for a little action and a chance to show the Navy boys their stuff."



The Air Force scrambled a pair of Northrop F-89 Scorpions from the 437th Fighter Interceptor Squadron to shoot down the Hellcat, which had been painted bright red for high visibility. The Scorpions had no cannons, but they had wingtip-mounted rocket pods, and each pod contained 52 small unguided rockets to be used in salvos against enemy aircraft. "Instead of facing planes representing the 'Red Menace' of the Communists, the Scorpions were facing a different kind of red menace that day," Merlin said, smiling.



The interceptors caught up with the left-circling drone northeast of Los Angeles at an altitude of 30,000 feet, he said. The jets tailed the Hellcat as it turned southwest and made another pass over Los Angeles before heading northwest toward Santa Paula. The jet crews, which consisted of a pilot and a radar observer, waited for the drone to reach an area that was relatively unpopulated. But when the crews attempted to fire, a design glitch in the automatic fire-control system for the Mighty Mouse rockets repeatedly prevented launches while the attack planes were turning, Merlin said.



The jets continued tailing the bright-red, prop-driven drone as it continued to circle, eventually leading them toward Fillmore and Frazier Park, he said. "It appeared to be heading toward the sparsely populated western end of the Antelope Valley, but suddenly, it turned southeast toward Los Angeles again, and time seemed to be running out," Merlin said.

The Air Force fliers opted to abandon their planes' automatic system and fire their rockets manually in an attempt to bring the drone down. "Although the interceptors were delivered with gun sights, the sights were considered unnecessary and removed because the pilots were supposed to be firing their unguided rockets with an automatic system," Merlin said.

The interceptors made their first attack run as the Hellcat crossed over the mountains near Castaic. Firing salvos of 42 rockets each, both planes missed the target, he said. "Rockets blazed through the sky and plunged earthward to spark brush fires north of Castaic and near the town of Newhall.

According to one witness, one rocket skipped through Placerita Canyon, leaving a string of fires near Oak of the Golden Dream Park," Merlin said. Placerita Canyon also was the location of the Indian Oil Co., and several of its oil sumps were ignited. The blazes in the canyon also at one point threatened to reach the Bermite Powder Co. explosives plant, he said.

While fires burned in its wake, the errant drone meandered northwest, toward Palmdale. As it did, the jets followed, expending the rest of their weapons in two more salvos of 32 and 30 rockets each as the two interceptors attempted to bring the Hellcat down, Merlin said. What happened was that the obsolete, unpiloted, unguided, unarmed, propeller-driven drone evaded the state-of-the-art jet interceptors. In all, 208 rockets were fired without scoring a single hit," he said.

"As the drone passed over Palmdale's downtown, Mighty Mouse rockets fell like hail," Merlin continued. "Miraculously, no one was hurt, and the drone finally exhausted its fuel supply, sputtered and fell, crashing into an open field eight miles east of (the) Palmdale airport," he said. Although the plane disintegrated and burned on impact, small pieces of debris — identifiable by part numbers and inspection stamps — were still at the site when Merlin visited it in July 1997.

According to the Aug. 23, 1956, edition of the Valley Press, one of the air-to-air rockets fell to earth and nearly hit a station wagon being driven by 17-year-old Larry Kempton of Leona Valley. Kempton, with his mother Bernice in the passenger seat, was driving west on Palmdale Boulevard just west of 10th Street West when a rocket exploded on the street in front of his car, the newspaper reported. Fragments from the explosion shredded Kempton's left front tire and put 17 holes in his radiator, hood and windshield.

Shrapnel also damaged a home near Avenue Q-8 and Third Street East and a home near Avenue Q-6 and Fourth Street East, the Valley Press reported. Edna Carlson, who lived in the home on Third Street East, said a chunk of shrapnel from one Air Force rocket burst through the front window of her home, ricocheted off the ceiling, went through a wall and came to rest in a kitchen cupboard, according to a report in the Aug. 17, 1956, edition of a Los Angeles newspaper. J.R. Hingle told the L.A. newspaper that pieces of metal blasted into his garage and home on Fourth Street East, nearly striking a guest named Lilly Willingham. Both homes are still standing and in use, Merlin said.

The L.A. paper also noted that "three good-size fires and numerous smaller blazes" were ignited in Palmdale by the rockets, in addition to the fires near Santa Clarita. The Placerita Canyon fire burned 75 to 100 acres before being brought under control by a team more than 200 firefighters, who helped save the Bermite plant, the newspaper account showed. "Another (fire) was seven miles north of Castaic on the old Ridge Route and burned 50 to 75 acres before being brought under control late in the afternoon" by about 100 firefighters.

The third and largest blaze was in Soledad Canyon, west of Mt. Gleason. At sundown, it had burned over 300 acres of heavy brush and continued to burn the day after the disastrous drone debacle despite the best efforts of 350 Forest Service firefighters, the paper reported. Eventually, 500 firefighters were called to the Soledad Canyon blaze, which was brought under control only after 350 acres had burned, according to later news accounts. The Placerita Canyon fire was extinguished after burning 100 acres and coming within 100 yards of the Bermite plant, and the Ridge Route fire was put out after charring 150 acres.

According to the Valley Press, a cleanup effort was undertaken in Palmdale by the Air Force's Air Defense Command in Oxnard. Military personnel scoured the area bounded by avenues Q and S, between Division Street and 10th Street West, in search of rockets or their remains, the newspaper reported. Flying in a helicopter, Capt. Sewell Griggers of the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Aero Detail spotted two of the 2 -inch rockets buried up to their tail fins in an empty field bounded by Division Street, Avenue Q-4, Second Street East and Avenue Q-7. The rockets were blown up by a sheriff's demolition crew, the paper showed.

Thirteen more rockets were found between Santa Clarita and Palmdale, and demolition personnel from Edwards Air Force Base were summoned to recover them, the Los Angeles paper reported. The rockets were supposed to arm themselves after being fired and were supposed to disarm themselves as they slowed down if they missed their targets, the L.A. paper noted. "At the time it happened, there was no way for the Navy to know the plane wouldn't fall into a home or a business in Los Angeles and kill people, so the Air Force did its best to bring the plane down with no injuries," Merlin said. " In the end, that's what happened, but the plane did it without any help," he said.

The Battle of Palmdale was won without a single shot striking the intended target.



F6F Hellcat drone



F-89 Scorpion

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