

Fighter jet crashes near Lemoore NAS

By Lewis Griswold Igriswold@fresnobee.com

A fighter jet assigned to Lemoore Naval Air Station crashed just before 4 p.m. Monday in a field near the base, the Navy confirmed Monday evening.

The pilot of the single-seat aircraft ejected safely and is in good condition, said base commander Capt. Monty Ashliman. He was taken for a medical evaluation, Ashliman said. The pilot's name was not released.

The cause of the crash is under investigation. Ashliman said he hopes the investigation won't take long, since the Navy wants to draw lessons that can prevent future crashes.

The pilot was in contact with air traffic control before the crash, Ashliman said.

The aircraft went down in a field near Highway 198 and Avenue 27 alignment, about two miles west of the Lemoore Naval Air Station entrance. The base is largely surrounded by farmland in a remote area of Kings County.

The base shut down its airfield after the crash, although Ashliman said he expected operations would resume Monday evening.

Lemoore Naval Air Station has lost several jets – and at least three crew members – to crashes over the last decade.

At 4:05 pm, the California Highway Patrol was notified of the incident, CHP spokesman Adam Barresi said.

The CHP kept the highway open but was not allowing people to stop to look, Barresi said.

Leonard Hinkle of Fresno works as a laborer for a paving company and was picking up cones when the accident happened.

“My buddy said, ‘Hey man, look at all that smoke!’ ”

“I looked over and saw the smoke,” he said, but said he did not hear the crash.

They decided to drive over and take a look, and arrived to see a fire crew attacking the burning plane with what may have been foam.

The smoke was so thick “you couldn't tell what it was,” he said. “But the fire truck threw foam on it and then you could see the wings sticking up.”

The pilot ejected, and Hinkle said he could see what “looked like a parachute.”

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In April 2011, two Naval officers were killed when their two-seat F/A-18F Super Hornet jet crashed west of the base.

Lt. Matthew Ira Lowe, 33, and Lt. Nathan Hollingsworth Williams, 28, were on a training mission when their fighter jet crashed into a Fresno County farm field.

In March 2010, two fighter jet pilots from Lemoore NAS survived when their jets collided over the northern Nevada desert.

The crash, which took place during a training mission, happened east of Fallon Naval Air Station.

One pilot landed his jet at the Fallon base about 15 minutes after the collision. The other pilot ejected safely before his jet crashed in a remote area of the base.

In 2006, 1st Lt. Brian R. Deforge, 25, died in a midair collision between two F/A-18C Hornets. The planes had just completed an air-to-air combat training mission over Fort Hunter Liggett, north of San Luis Obispo, and were moving into close formation to return to Lemoore when they collided.

The other pilot ejected safely.

Lewis Griswold: [559-441-6104](tel:559-441-6104), [@fb_LewGriswold](https://www.facebook.com/fb_LewGriswold)