

089249

250.12

RELEASED



COMPTROLLER GENERAL OF THE UNITED STATES  
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20548

78-0-50

NOV 22 1971

B-162578

Dear Mr. Long:

This is in response to your request of October 19, 1971, that we determine whether information concerning the separation of an engine from a C-5A aircraft at Altus Air Force Base, Oklahoma, on September 29, 1971, was deliberately withheld from the Congress and from top Department of Defense (DOD) officials. 05

3

We found that top DOD officials were apprised of the accident soon after it occurred, and we found no evidence of a deliberate attempt to withhold information from them or from the Congress. Rather, the delay in informing the Congress seems to have occurred because the significance of the accident did not become apparent until 3 days after its occurrence, when the Air Force determined that it would be necessary to replace the engine pylons of seven additional C-5A aircraft before permitting further flight.

Shown below are the specific questions in your letter and a discussion of the information that we developed.

1. If the news of the engine falling off came out at that time (on September 29, 1971, when Mr. Henry Durham was testifying before the Joint Economic Committee), it would have proven very embarrassing to the Air Force. Was this testimony considered in the decision to withhold the announcement of the accident? 35

We found no evidence that Mr. Durham's testimony was a factor in the way in which the Air Force handled the news release of the engine separation.

It appears, in fact, that the news release was handled in accordance with normal Air Force procedures, which is to release a story at the location of the incident and to make the Air Force Public Information Office in Washington available to answer any follow-up inquiries from reporters.

DL601979 904196

089249

B-162578

The engine separation occurred at 2:46 p.m., Central Daylight Saving Time (CDST), on September 29, 1971, at Altus Air Force Base. Prior to 6 p.m. that day, the Altus Air Force Base Information Officer, in accordance with Air Force regulations, issued the following news release. asc 01007  
DLG 01986

"A C-5 Galaxy from the 443rd Military Airlift Wing was damaged in a mishap at Altus AFB [Air Force Base] this afternoon (1445). As the aircraft taxied into the runway, prior to take-off, full power was applied and one engine separated from the wing, falling to the ground.

"A small fire from residual fuel within the wing was quickly extinguished. Extent of damage to the wing has not been determined. Cause of the incident is being investigated by a qualified board of officers.

"The aircraft is one of the Wing's original C-5s and was assigned here early in 1970. It had logged more than 1,275 flying hours and 3,100 landings."

The Air Force informed us that the above release was read on the Altus radio station (KWHW) at 6 p.m., CDST, on September 29, 1971. On the following day the accident was reported in the local newspaper--the Altus Times-Democrat--and on television stations in Lawton (KSWO) and Oklahoma City (KWTV). On October 1, 1971, the Daily Oklahoman, an Oklahoma City newspaper, printed a picture of the C-5A aircraft without the engine. Quite often the wire services would pick up such a story from the local press, but in this instance they did not.

- CB*
2. News of the accident, according to Senator William Proxmire's office, would have been impetus enough to offer the amendment on the C-5A and to again drag the unfortunate story of the C-5A into the press. Did the Air Force foresee this as a possibility and opt for a delay in announcing the accident?

B-162578

As discussed above we found no delay in announcing the news of the accident. Within 4 hours of the engine separation, the Altus Air Force Base Information Officer issued the news release.

- 3a. In an article in the Washington Post of October 8, 1971, Mr. Mike Getler reported that Mr. Jerry Friedheim had said that even top DOD officials had not been notified of the accident. Is this a normal and an acceptable procedure?

This does not seem to be either a normal or an acceptable procedure. The article may have been somewhat misleading. DOD records indicate that Mr. Friedheim stated only that Mr. Daniel Z. Henkin, Assistant Secretary of Defense (Public Affairs), had not been informed of the accident. Officials of the Air Force Information Office, however, stated that Secretary Henkin's staff was informed of the accident on September 30, 1971, at the daily 9 a.m. interservice staff meeting for the Public Affairs Office.

- 3b. What is the official DOD practice in announcing such incidents to the Congress and to top DOD officials?

DOD policy is to have the individual services involved inform Congress and top DOD officials of such incidents. The Office of the Secretary of Defense, for example, would be informed by Air Force Secretary Robert C. Seamans, Jr. Officials of the Air Force Information Office advised us that they discussed the accident with Secretary Seamans on September 29 and 30, 1971, and advised him that the accident was reported to the news media at Altus Air Force Base in the normal manner.

Air Force practice is to notify all top Air Force officials immediately of all unusual events by telephone. Within 25 minutes of this accident, it was reported by telephone to Air Force Headquarters, and within 8 hours all concerned Air Force commands, including the Chief of Staff, received a full message report.

B-162578

The Air Force Director of Legislative Liaison informed us that he received telephone notification of the accident on September 29, 1971, and requested his staff and the Air Force Information Office to determine its significance. On Monday, October 4, 1971, when the Director learned of an order to replace the aft engine pylons on seven other C-5A aircraft, he asked for sufficient details to inform the Congress.

As a matter of policy the Director attempts, whenever possible, to advise the Chairmen of the House and Senate Committees on Armed Services and of the House and Senate Committees on Appropriations before the information is made available to the news media. In this instance he did not advise them of the engine loss, but he did advise them of the subsequent order to replace the engine pylons at about 11:30 a.m. on October 6, 1971.

3c. How long did it take the Air Force to announce the weight-lifting record achieved by the C-5A at Edwards Air Force Base?

On May 21, 1969, the Lockheed-Georgia Company announced that on that same day a C-5A Galaxy had established a weight-lifting record. Air Force Information Office personnel point out that, when such a planned event occurs, a press release usually is prepared and coordinated in advance so that it can be released soon after the event takes place.

4. Who was responsible for delaying the release of this information for a week?

As discussed above, there was no delay in making public the news of the accident soon after it occurred. Normally the Information Office would not issue further releases after the initial announcement of the September 29, 1971, engine loss was made to the news media in Oklahoma but would hold itself available to answer inquiries for further details.

B-162578

On Friday, October 1, 1971, the Information Office received an inquiry from a reporter for a weekly magazine. The reporter did not have an urgent deadline; therefore his inquiry was routinely deferred to Monday, October 4, 1971. While preparing the requested data, the Information Office learned that 2 days earlier the aft engine pylons were identified as the probable cause of the engine separation and that orders had been issued to replace those pylons on seven other C-5A aircraft before further flight.

This information was drafted into a potential reply to the magazine inquiry and was coordinated with the Military Airlift Command and the Air Force Systems Command. On Wednesday, October 6, 1971, with coordination completed, the Information Office provided its information to the Air Force Legislative Liaison and to the DOD Office of Public Affairs for release. *DLG 01981*  
*DLG 01982*  
While approving the news release for the magazine reporter, Secretary Henkin (Public Affairs) considered the information of sufficient interest to use for general release. This was accomplished at about 5 p.m. on October 6, 1971.

5. Is the Air Force or DOD investigating this delay?

Neither the Air Force nor DOD is investigating the manner in which the release of the news of the accident was handled.

6. What was the reason for finally releasing the information on the accident?

As stated above the accident was first reported to the news media on September 29, 1971. Further release of information regarding the engine separation was made when its significance became apparent by the order to replace the pylons on seven other C-5A aircraft.

- - - -

While examining into the reporting of this accident, we obtained documentation from and had discussions with officials of

B-162578

the Office of the Secretary of Defense and of the Department of the Air Force.

No other distribution of this report is being made. If we can be of further assistance in this matter, please let us know.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "James B. Stacks".

Comptroller General  
of the United States

R The Honorable Clarence D. Long  
CI House of Representatives