

Mike Mangold statement regarding Stead Midair, 13 June 2013

I was the Jet Class representative in the Stead control tower during the afternoon (jet) flying period: 1625-1700, on Thr, 13 June 2013. In reference to the incident location, my position was over 6 stories high and approximately 10,000 feet directly behind and south of the incident. The entire racecourse and all on-course aircraft were clearly visible from the tower.

Jet #777, a certified racer, was flying practice laps with 2 other experienced and certified jet racers: #6 and #7. All certified racers were flying solo in their aircraft. Prior to entry of 3 rookie jets (with instructors onboard #15 & #707) in a trail formation, all experienced racers were instructed to, and did climb above the racecourse environment. After the 3 rookie jets (#15, #707, #99) had established themselves on course the experienced racers were permitted to re-enter the racecourse. The experienced racers were to avoid the 3-ship trail formation as they were maneuvering at slower speeds around the course for orientation.

The rookie 3-ship had flown several laps in a trail formation prior to the incident. During this time, experienced jet racers #6 & #7 pulled off the racecourse and entered the landing pattern to terminate their sorties. Jet #777 remained airborne flying on-course with the rookie 3-ship. At the time of the incident there were only 4 jets on the racecourse, however they were all in close proximity approaching pylon #4.

From my position in the tower I observed the 3 ship fly around pylon #1-3 in a trail formation with approximately 3000' spacing between the first and last aircraft. There was also some altitude difference between the 3 jets as they maneuvered to stay behind each other and survey the course. Jet #777 was approaching the 3-ship from behind at a lower altitude with considerable overtake in speed. Just prior to starting the turn at pylon #4, jet #777 begin to maneuver up, behind, and outside of the 3-ship formation. Jet #777 speed was decreasing but it still had overtake on the last jet in the formation, #99.

At approximately 1645 MDT, I saw the two jets merge. It appeared #777 came up from below #99 on his left side and passed underneath #99 with a slight left-to-right crossing angle. As #777 was faster, that jet emerged on the right side and in front of #99. At the crossing, I saw a small puff of smoke and a small piece of debris twirling in the sky, which I suspect was part of the vertical stabilizer of jet #777.

A "midair" and "mayday" was subsequently called for #99 & #777 and confirmed by several airborne pilots and ground observers. The two jets flew in separate directions performing emergency checks and joining with a safety chase to assess and confirm any damage. Jet #99 had less damage and landed first, uneventfully. Jet #777 had damage to the vertical stabilizer and rudder. Due to control concerns the pilot elected to land gear-up displaying extraordinary skills and equipment ruggedness.

Throughout the entire incident the staff in the control tower performed exemplary handling multiple emergencies by: clearing the airspace and runways, managing communication, and coordinating with crash & rescue teams. The tower team worked together giving priority to the mayday aircraft while still directing numerous other race aircraft to remain clear or land at alternate airports.

If you have any further questions you may contact me at your convenience.

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