

McDonnell Douglas RF-4C #65-0871

July 6, 1966

On the evening of July 6, 1966, RF-4C #65-0871 departed Mountain Home AFB, Idaho, for a low-level, night-time reconnaissance training mission to Wells, Nevada, and back. The aircraft was with the 10th Tactical Reconnaissance Squadron, 67th Tactical Reconnaissance Wing. In the front seat was senior pilot Maj. Douglas Thomas and in the rear seat was pilot systems operator 1st Lt. James Metsala. The mission went as planned, and upon returning to the base Maj. Thomas was instructed to have Lt. Metsala execute his first VFR night landing from the rear seat. After a normal approach, the RF-4C struck the ground short of the runway, collapsing the landing gear. It skidded several hundred yards through the desert, leaving a debris trail behind. Maj. Thomas suffered an injured back, and Lt. Metsala escaped uninjured. An accident review board found that the lack of visual approach slope indicator lights on the runway at Mountain Home AFB contributed to the accident. Special thanks to Chris Baird and Craig Fuller for help with locating this crash site. Site visited on 10/1/21.











The front landing gear strut







#65-0871 shortly after the accident (Courtesy of USAF)



Maj. Douglas L. Thomas stands in front of a Lockheed T-33A. One of his flight instructors was future astronaut Virgil "Gus" Grissom. After serving 27 years in the Air Force, he had a distinguished career in civil aviation, accumulating over 17,000 flight hours. He passed away in 2011. (Courtesy of Douglas Thomas, Jr.)



Lt. Col. James C. Metsala (far right) chats with another pilot in front of an RF-4C at Bergstrom AFB, Texas, in this 1982 photo. (Courtesy of the Austin Public Library, Austin, Texas)