

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY
AIRCRAFT ACCIDENT INVESTIGATION
RQ-1B, S/N 96-3022
NELLIS AIR FORCE BASE, NEVADA
25 JANUARY 2002

On 25 January 2002, at 1308 local time, an RQ-1B Predator unmanned aerial vehicle, S/N 96-3022, crashed while landing at a classified forward operating location within the U.S. Central Command area of responsibility. The Predator, permanently assigned to the 57th Wing (57 WG), 11th Reconnaissance Squadron (11 RS), Nellis Air Force Base (AFB), Nevada, was returning early from an Operation ENDURING FREEDOM reconnaissance mission over Afghanistan due to fluctuating oil pressure indications. The aircraft was destroyed beyond repair upon impact. There were no reported injuries or fatalities from this accident.

The mishap pilot's first attempted landing resulted in a go-around due to the effects of gusty winds. During the second approach under similar wind conditions, in the flare the mishap aircraft's nose ballooned. The mishap pilot attempted to push the nose forward to correct this condition. Before the mishap pilot had the opportunity to initiate go-around procedures again, the mishap aircraft's nose pitched forward beyond his control. The nose gear struck the runway with excessive force, breaking the nose landing gear strut. As an additional result of the excessively hard landing, the aircraft's right tailplane separated from the fuselage. The resulting asymmetrical pitch and yaw caused the aircraft to bank sharply to the right. It impacted the ground approximately 100 yards east of the runway.

The primary cause of the mishap was the pilot's inability to maintain positive control of the aircraft's pitch due to the adverse effects of strong wind gusts. The resulting structural damage from a nose gear-first landing further inhibited control of the aircraft, which then impacted the ground. Gust wind speeds reported by the air traffic control tower just prior to the mishap were at the maximum limit for RQ-1B landings. Gust speeds reported five minutes after the mishap were out of limits.

Under 10 U.S.C. 2254(d), any opinion of the accident investigators as to the cause of, or the factors contributing to, the accident set forth in the accident investigation report may not be considered as evidence in any civil or criminal proceeding arising from an aircraft accident, nor may such information be considered an admission of liability by the United States or by any person referred to in those conclusions or statements.