

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY
AIRCRAFT ACCIDENT INVESTIGATION
RQ-1L PREDATOR, S/N 00-3065
INDIAN SPRINGS AIR FORCE AUXILIARY FIELD, NEVADA
25 OCTOBER 2002

On 25 October 2002, at 08:40 local Pacific Daylight Time, an RQ-1L Predator unmanned aerial vehicle, serial number 00-3065, 11th Reconnaissance Squadron, Nellis Air Force Base, Nevada, impacted the terrain approximately nine nautical miles west of Indian Springs Air Force Auxiliary Field, Nevada.

Mission planning and required briefings with all crewmembers were conducted on 25 October 2002. Aircraft preparations, preflight and engine start were uneventful. The training mission was designed to include traffic pattern operations, instructor pilot upgrade training, and Predator B-Model difference training, including area work in range airspace. While attempting to descend to 6,500 feet above mean sea level from 10,000 feet -- preparing for an entry into the Indian Springs traffic pattern -- the aircraft descended to 5,236 feet in the vicinity of mountainous terrain, causing the crew to experience line-of-sight datalink problems between the ground control station and the aircraft. The crew had flown the aircraft into a position where high terrain was obstructing the datalink signal. Following attempts to regain the datalink through manipulation of the aircraft and ground station antennas, the mishap pilot eventually executed emergency procedures to manually sever the datalink between the ground control station and the aircraft, forcing the aircraft to initiate preset maneuvers designed to safeguard the aircraft during lost datalink situations. The aircraft impacted the mountainous terrain 16 seconds after the emergency procedures were initiated.

There were no injuries or fatalities from the accident. Upon impact, the aircraft was damaged beyond economical repair. The loss is valued at \$3,300,000. There are no claims for damage to government or private property. There was minimal media interest regarding this accident.

The primary cause of this accident, supported by clear and convincing evidence, was inattention to altitude on the part of the crew. Significant contributing factors, supported by substantial evidence, were the crew's loss of situational awareness -- including fixation on landing gear checklist procedures, distraction with antenna and transmitter configuration management, and incorrect analysis of lost downlink video -- and the untimely application of emergency action procedures for "Total Downlink Failure Below 2,000 Feet AGL."

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.