

F-16 pilot confirmed killed in crash

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Military personnel walk past police officers yesterday in New Taipei City's Ruifang District on their way to help in the search for a missing F-16 fighter jet and its pilot.

Photo: Liao Chen-huei, Taipei Times

The pilot of an F-16 air force jet that went missing yesterday while taking part in the live-fire drills of the annual Han Kuang exercise has been confirmed dead, after rescuers found body parts and other items on Wufenshan (烏分山) in New Taipei City.

The air force's forensic science unit confirmed that the remains belonged to 31-year-old Major Wu Yen-ting (吳延廷) of the 12th Tactical Reconnaissance Squadron, the Ministry of National Defense said in a statement last night.

Searchers had found blood-stained pieces of the pilot's anti-G suit and other clothing, as well as body parts in trees at the crash site, it said.

The confirmation of identification came just hours after officers from the 5th Tactical Composite Wing had held an evening press event at the Hualien Air Force Base.

Wu was flying an F-16 with the tail number 6648, which took off from the base at 1:09pm and radar contact was lost at 1:43pm over northern Taiwan, Air Force Command Headquarters had said earlier in the day.

Residents in New Taipei City and Keelung were quoted by local Chinese-language media as

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saying they heard a loud bang that appeared to come from the mountainous areas around New Taipei City's Ruifang (瑞芳) and Nuannuan (暖暖) districts.

The National Airborne Service Corps and firefighters from Keelung, New Taipei City and Yilan County were deployed to help in the search and rescue efforts.

A hiker telephoned the New Taipei City Fire Department at 3:22pm to say he had found the possible wreckage of the jet, the department said.

At 4:18pm firefighters found what appeared to be the crash site on the Wufenshan hiking trail about 3km from the meteorological radar observatory, the department added.

Firefighters found "a substantial quantity" of debris, including a yellow military drag parachute, many toppled trees, skid marks and a 100m long gash in the woods, it said.

About 6pm, rescuers discovered what they suspected to be human remains and pieces of personal equipment, including the pilot's G-suit and insignia, which were sent for examination by forensic technicians, officers told the Hualien news conference, which was attended by Major General Hsieh Ming-te (許明德), director of political warfare at the 6th Army Corps.

Military personnel had identified the parachute as a fighter jet's drag chute from a photograph taken by the search team.

Minister of National Defense Yen De-fa (嚴德發) and Chief of General Staff Admiral Lee Hsi-ming (李希明) had directed rescue efforts from the Joint Operations Command Center and the Air Force Operational Command Center in Taipei, respectively, the defense ministry said.

The search mission was suspended at 8 pm due to poor visibility, but is scheduled to resume early today to look for more parts of the wreckage.

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The air force temporarily grounded all of its F-16s until further notice.

The Office of the Inspector-general of the ministry and the Air Force Command have been ordered to create a task force to investigate the cause of the crash and to enhance safety standards during aerial exercises, the ministry said.

Air Force Command Headquarters said Wu was a 2009 graduate of the Air Force Academy and had 1,039 hours of flight time, including 736 hours in F-16 jets.

Wu had survived a crash in 2013, when his fighter jet's starter experienced a failure that resulted in loss of power during an interception training, sources said.

He had been able to eject from the aircraft and suffered light injuries, the sources said.

Wu was from Yilan County's Dongshan Township (東山鄉).

He is survived by his wife, Lin Fang-ying (林芳瑩), who is also in the air force.

They met when they were stationed at Chiayi Airport and married in 2014.

President Tsai Ing-wen (蔡英文) and Yen expressed their condolences and pledged compensation to Wu's family.

Additional reporting by Yu Heng, Yu Chao-fu, Wang Chin-yi and CNA

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