

BUTTERFLY AIRPLANE CRASH SITE

Late in the afternoon of 8 July 1957, two F-86 Sabrejet fighter aircraft from Davis-Monthan Air Force Base met in a midair collision in the sky over Mount Bigelow. The two aircraft, piloted by 1st Lt. G. H. Van Vliet and 1st Lt. Joseph J. Onate, were on a routine training mission when for some unknown reason they collided. The tail section broke away from one of the jets. The other apparently lost a wing and the two aircraft plummeted out of control. Both pilots, with just seconds to spare, ejected, yanked their ripcords before their parachutes could open automatically, and floated through monsoon clouds to safety and rescue in the forest below.

One of the jets crashed near an access road. This made removal of the wreckage relatively easy and the crash site was cleaned up shortly after the crash. The other aircraft slammed into the earth near the Butterfly Trail about 3 miles from Soldier Camp. The site is at an elevation of about 7,000 feet. Officials determined that the removal of the wreckage of that aircraft would be expensive and require the use of helicopters so a decision was made to leave the remains where they landed. So there it lays, an enduring backwoods reminder of the sometimes abrupt enforcement of the law of gravity.



Figure 1. F-86 Sabre Jet Remains



Figure 2. F-86 Sabre Jet Remains



Fig. 3. F-86 Sabre Jet Remains

Summary prepared by T. Johnson from Arizona Daily Star articles dated 24 September 1991 and 10 May 2002. Photographs in Figures 1 and 3 by Tom Johnson and in Figures 2, 4 and 5 by Jim Chisholm



Figure 4. F-86 Sabre Jet Remains



Figure 5. F-86 Sabre Jet Remains