

NAVSEA Recovers Downed Air Force Jet

10 October 2012

WASHINGTON — NAVSEA's Supervisor of Salvage and Diving (SUPSALV) completed the recovery of a downed U.S. Air Force F-16 Fighting Falcon Sept. 16, in the North Pacific Ocean near the Kuril Islands.

The F-16 departed Misawa Air Base, Japan, July 22, en route to Eielson Air Base, Alaska. While in flight, the F-16 lost power and crashed into the North Pacific Ocean. The pilot ejected and was successfully recovered by the crew of a Japanese fishing vessel.

Upon receiving a request for assistance from the Air Force, SUPSALV moved a recovery team to Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, where the team would meet with fleet ocean tug USNS NAVAJO (T-ATF 169) for transit to the suspected debris field.

"After about two weeks of staging, preparing and testing our systems, our team departed Hawaii and arrived in Hachinohe, Japan, 10 days later," said Lt. Cmdr Chris Addington, NAVSEA assistant for salvage. Once there, the team picked up additional [remote-operated vehicle] crew and F-16 experts before departing for the suspected target area."



Stern deck of USNS NAVAJO at sea, enroute OPAREA. Major systems on deck include: FADOSS, just astern of rigid inflatable hull (RIB) boat, CURV to left, astern of white control van and Orion side scan sonar at stern.

The team aboard NAVAJO arrived near the suspected underwater debris field Sept. 1, and immediately began the search.

"A series of wide range sonar search lines revealed a traditional debris pattern along the last known heading of the aircraft," said Addington. "A higher resolution sonar line was towed through the suspected target area and detected the presence of a major debris field."



Side Scan Sonar, Orion at the stern of USNS NAVAJO ready for launching on 1 September 2012

A remote-operated vehicle was deployed in the middle of the target area and located F-16 debris upon reaching the bottom. With positive confirmation the wreckage was from the missing F-16, the recovery phase began.



7 September image of remotely operated vehicle (ROV) CURV 21 being recovered onboard USNS NAVAJO.

"The F-16 airframe was found completely demolished and evenly spread over the entire debris field," he said. "A heavy lift system was embarked in case the aircraft was discovered intact and could be lifted in one attempt, however, since no individual pieces of debris found were heavier than 3,000 lbs, all lifts were conducted using [a Cable Underwater Recovery Vehicle]."

With the recovery phase successfully completed, USNS NAVAJO returned to Hachinohe, Japan, where the wreckage was off-loaded and transported to Misawa Air Base, Japan.

"As a whole, this operation was fast-paced and entirely successful," said Addington. "Our efforts critical in meeting the [Air Force's] intent for salvage — to find out what had happened to prevent similar future aircraft mishaps.