

Kansas hero has first public appearance at Statehouse

TOPEKA (AP) — Lt. j.g. Jeff Vignery fought to keep a Navy surveillance plane from crashing after it was struck by a Chinese fighter, the pilot told a Statehouse news conference today, but said he doesn't consider himself a hero.

Vignery said he and another Navy pilot were at the controls of the EP-3E turboprop when it was struck April 1 over the South China Sea and forced to land on Hainan island.

The 24 crew members were detained 11 days by the Chinese government.

"We're not heroes. We were just doing our jobs," he said today. "The real heroes are the American people who supported us."

His comments came during his first

public appearance in Kansas since the crew members were released. He was at the Statehouse to be honored by the House and meet with Gov. Bill Graves, who presented him with a state flag flown in his honor.

Vignery, 27, grew up in Goodland, where residents are planning a homecoming celebration for him May 5. He joined the Navy in May 1997.

During a news conference, Vignery recounted the harrowing minutes after the F-8 fighter buzzed the plane and then collided with it, clipping a propeller and knocking off its nose cone.

The plane plummeted about 7,500 feet in about 45 seconds before the pilots managed to straighten it out. They landed about 20-30 minutes later, he

said. Vignery said the plane rolled into a 130-degree angle bank and plunged downward as he and the other pilot, Lt. Shane Osborne, fought to regain control.

"My thought was I really couldn't believe this was happening," Vignery said. "I looked at Lt. Osborne ... his eyes were big. I'm sure my eyes were about to pop out of my head also."

Vignery said the experience hasn't

changed his mind about wanting to stay in the Navy or continuing to fly.

"Ever since I can remember, I wanted to fly planes," he said. "I'm living my dreams. I'm excited about getting back up in a plane."

Vignery said he will report back to his squadron in mid-May. In the meantime, he plans to spend time with friends and family in Goodland and Dodge City and maybe get in some fishing.

Goodland native honored for bravery

VIGNERY, from Page 1

Officer's Training Corps in college.

But first, Jeff and his family spent the morning in the Statehouse, shaking hands with officials and talking to reporters.

Gary Deeter, Morrison's secretary, said the Vignerys arrived at 8 a.m., talk-

ing with news and television reporters for about 45 minutes before meeting with Gov. Graves. He said the governor presented a state flag, flown in the pilot's honor, to Jeff and Julie and visited with the family.

Deeter said the resolution, honoring Vignery for his bravery and dedication, was presented on the House floor,

where Jeff talked briefly.

After the presentation, Rep. Morrison called the ceremony "impressive." He was moved by Jeff's speech and the family's closeness, he said, noting that tears streamed down Judi Vignery's face while her son spoke.

Judi Vignery said her son is taken aback by all the attention and accolades

he is receiving.

"He's just in awe," she said. "He's going, 'I was just doing my job.' He doesn't think he's deserving of it all."

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