

An Experience To Remember

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The day was Thursday, July 11, 1963, and I was preparing myself for a flight in the F-86H Saber Jet from Martin State Airport. The weather was warm with lots of sun and a scattered deck of clouds at 10,000 feet. As I entered the Flying Operations Office, I was told to expedite my takeoff. Col. Mitchell, the Commanding Officer of our Air National Guard unit, the 175th Tactical Fighter Unit was in trouble and was orbiting at 20,000 feet over the Bay Bridge. He had lost all of his flight instruments. The safest procedure in a case like this is for the aircraft to be accompanied back to the home airfield by another aircraft so that proper approach altitudes and landing speeds may be maintained.

I took off a little after noon and turned south, climbing at 350 knots, passing up through the cloud deck. My position was abeam of Sparrows Point and the altimeter read just above 13,000 feet when everything seemed to go wrong. The fire warning light went on and the aircraft began to vibrate violently. There was an explosion and fire in the engine compartment. I immediately retarded the throttle, double-checked the fire warning lights and tried to level the aircraft. I discovered that the right rudder cable was severed and the controls were frozen, indicating that the hydraulic lines were severed (the controls for the ailerons and elevators are hydraulically actuated). The engine RPM was declining below idle, indication engine flameout. I immediately radioed Col. Mitchell and advised him of my problems and position. He answered that he had me in sight and that I was trailing black smoke. "Get out, you're on fire!" he ordered.

I had received classroom training in emergency procedures and had read thoroughly all the details of ejecting from a disabled aircraft. Learning about it and doing it is not quite the same. But I knew the time had come and went through the prescribed drill: position body, feet in stirrups, elbows close to body. Lift handles on each side of seat that fire explosive charges that blow the canopy. Squeeze triggers on handles to eject seat. The canopy flew off with a bang; the seat blasted upward as the charge equivalent to a 75mm shell exploded under me. I was out, still on the seat, falling and gyrating like ice cubes stirred around in a glass. The timed delay of the seat belt charges elapsed and the seat blasted off and pulled the ripcord. The seat was gone the parachute opened and everything worked flawlessly, to my great relief. When the noise subsided, I looked up and saw the chute deployed; I checked for torn panels and damage. There was none. A moment later I floated down through the broken deck of clouds and located the burning aircraft in the water south of the Bay Bridge. I prepared myself for a water landing, inflating the underarm life preserver and raft.

At this point there was nothing left to do but enjoy the ride down and the view. Looking down on the water, there must have been at least a hundred boats in the water in the vicinity north of the Bay Bridge. I began to look for the emergency flares when a fishing boat pulled up along side of me. On board were two off-duty policemen, troopers Davey L. Cook and Bruce White (how lucky could I get?). They took me to shore at Sandy Point where I called the base that I was all

right. Moments later, a helicopter from Andrews Air Force Base picked me up and returned me to Martin State airport.

As we got airborne in the helicopter, it shook like blazes. I asked if this was normal vibration. The pilot said that it was. I remarked that I had ejected from a disabled F-86 just moments before that had vibrated that bad. The flight back went quickly. As we landed the Martin crew was glad to see me and was thankful that I was back, though I was thoroughly wet and sorry that I could not save a wonderful airplane like the F-86 H.

Col. Mitchell was able to return to base and land safely without his instruments, quite an accomplishment in a jet aircraft on a short runway.

Joe Radoci 1919-2001