

THE END OF SABRE 26710

by John Swallow

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Jim and I show up at the Servicing Desk to sign out our aircraft. We'd already had one trip that morning: although our squadron was on "Alert", we'd got airborne at oh-eight hundred on a routine high level mission against anything that moved and had spent a glorious hour-five pulling "g" and turning JP4 into exhaust fumes. Returning to base, we'd signed in our aircraft and headed for the cafeteria for a cup of squadron coffee then into the debriefing room for a rehash of our trip. A call from Servicing advising that our aircraft were ready for a second sortie necessitated the collection of parachutes and helmets and a walk to the end of the building to take possession of our aircraft.

PLANE CHANGE

Unserviceable on landing, my aircraft was still down and had been replaced by another. In answer to my query as to which aircraft he wanted, Jim indicated that his previous aircraft was slightly deficient in power and that it would be an excellent aircraft for me to take, seeing as it was my turn to lead the section.

BRIEFING

The pre-flight briefing was simple: it mimicked the morning brief except I was leading and Jim was the wingman. We fired up and commenced the long taxi to the far end of the runway. Winters on the Continent were not particularly severe, but this winter had seen a lot of snow. The ground was white with what appeared to be about a foot of the fluffy stuff.

LINE-UP

We rounded the corner onto runway 03 and line up echelon right for the formation take-off. Take-off checks had been completed during taxi and all that remained was the engine check: the throttle was advanced to maximum in one second to check fuel flow scheduling and then reduced to ninety percent power. Temperatures and pressures were all within limits. A glance down the right wing was met with a nod from Jim that indicated that he was ready to go.

TAKE-OFF

Brakes were released and the engine speed smoothly increased to, and limited at, ninety-seven percent power to give number two a couple of percent to play with. At fifty knots, another glance shows Jim glued to the right wing. At 110 knots, the nose was rotated to the take-off position with lift-off occurring at 130 knots. Gear and flaps were selected up and the climb established. I note Jim still tucked in tight as we approach the Alert Hangar.

TROUBLE

As we pass over the end of the runway at about two hundred feet above ground level, a massive explosion (accompanied by a transitory smell of smoke) is heard and felt aft of the cockpit coupled with a complete loss of acceleration. The sudden cessation of over seven thousand pounds of thrust was noticeable enough to force me against my shoulder straps.

"HOUSTON, WE HAVE A PROBLEM"

NO SOLUTION

I quickly scan the instrument panel looking for an answer to the loss of power: the deceleration is now robbing me of airspeed and with a best glide around 185 knots, I'm shortly going to have to start giving up precious altitude for airspeed. The only anomaly noted during the scan is that the engine RPM is now sitting at one hundred percent, a setting I have not commanded. Out of the corner of my eye, I catch sight of number two high in my two o'clock position, banked into me, trying desperately to stay with me without stalling. Then, in my headset, his voice:

"LEAD, EJECT!"

This not a phrase I want to hear from a number two. The urgency conveyed in those words implied a dire emergency: I turn in the cockpit and look over my left shoulder towards the tail to check for smoke or flame. There is none. I do not want to leave the security of my warm cockpit for the below zero environment just outside on the basis of a radio call; I am momentarily unsure as to my next move. Other than not being shoved somewhere, there is nothing wrong with my aircraft. There must be something I can do, some switch I can select which will make everything aright. However, in turning back to check my panel instruments once more, two illuminated lights on the right hand side demand my attention. My decision has been made for me: I have both the forward fire warning light and the aft fire warning light telling me that something has gone drastically wrong in the engine compartment.

DECISION TIME

I mentally tick off my situation: my engine is running at one hundred percent but I am not developing any thrust; I'm nose high and losing airspeed; and I appear to have a fire in the engine compartment. On the positive side, I'm still under control, I have airspeed, I'm climbing slightly, and I have at least 200 feet of air below me: I'm inside the ejection envelope.

I TRANSMIT "I'M GETTING OUT". JIM REPLIES: "AFFIRMATIVE, EJECT!"

Things happen fast now: I duck my head to prevent losing it, at the same time raising the left armrest to expose the canopy trigger: With a squeeze of the trigger, the canopy is gone; replaced by a rush of air. The sides of the aircraft are midway between my shoulder and elbow: I'm now sitting out in the open. I lean back placing my head firmly against the headrest and plant my heels into the seat footrests, at the same time raising the right armrest to expose the ejection trigger. As I place my fingers around the trigger, I remember that I don't have my visor down to protect against the windblast; I instinctively close my eyes and squeeze. The ejection system worked as advertised, hurling me out of the aircraft with enough force to clear the tail: there was a feeling of "being out-of-control" which was replaced by a period of negative "g", probably occurring as I tumbled and/or when I separated from the seat.

IN THE CLEAR

At this point, it seemed prudent to open my eyes: I've stabilized and I'm face down with a perspective of the ground that is normally limited to the skydiving fraternity. There is no feeling of fear or life scenes flashing before my eyes: the last altitude I remember is two hundred feet above ground and with the ejection system only guaranteed to a minimum of two hundred feet, my only thought is: "This is going to be close".

INITIAL IMPACT AND DEBRIS FIELD

As I reach for the manual "D" ring, the automatic system activates: the 'chute deploys and snaps me into an upright position. I look up and take note that I have a fully inflated canopy, then look down between my feet and see the ground rushing up. Noise ahead causes me to lift my gaze in time to take in the spectacle of 550 gallons of jet fuel being turned into an inferno; a rising ball of red flame and black smoke billowing into the sky.

I notice that I'm having trouble inhaling; not being plugged into the aircraft oxygen system means having to overcome a valve spring to breathe: I disconnect my oxygen mask and place my hands on the risers.

LANDING

The ground is really close now; I mentally go over the landing procedures according to the training film which we are required to view every six months: hands on the risers, feet together; at touchdown, fall sideways onto the hip and then the shoulders. Get up, run around in front of the canopy and collapse it if it has not done so already. The ground is rushing up at me; I renew my grip on the risers and a bit later I'm lying on the ground; flat on my back; I can't breathe. All the air is knocked out of me and I'm gasping like a fish out of water. The training film forgot to mention the effect on a body's center of gravity when thirty pounds of emergency survival equipment attached to one's posterior. I have landed like I was released from a very tall cow. After about twenty seconds, I've recovered enough to get up and try to get rid of the parachute and seat pack: Jim is circling overhead trying to ascertain my well being and I don't want him stalling in on top of me as has happened before. The 'chute is no problem, but the seat pack does not want to release: the connectors must have no downward pull on them to disconnect. One releases but the other will not and I'm left trying to walk around with the seat pack dangling off my side, banging into my thigh with every step. Jim comes by once more, then leaves: I never do find out if he continued on with the mission or landed.

BACK TO BASE

About five minutes later, a squadron technician arrives: he was in the process of cleaning and washing his car a short distance away in a trailer court and witnessed the whole procedure. We toss everything into his back seat and head for the airport. I spend the night in the hospital where my squadron mates ensure I have enough liquid to prevent dehydration. I have suffered only a hairline fracture to one vertebrae and a slightly detached retina that is picked up during a routine eye exam several months later. I am back in the air in three weeks.

WHAT HAPPENED?

The cause of the accident comes to light during the subsequent investigation: an aft piece of the engine came adrift and blocked the intake to the tailpipe: the resulting overpressure blew the tailpipe off its moorings allowing it to fall onto the fuselage floor. The engine was no longer a "jet" engine but a gas producer. The lack of "back pressure" allowed the engine RPM to rise the three percent I had noticed.

THE CAUSE OF THE EXPLOSION

Moreover, the tailpipe was covered with a fiberglass batting to protect surrounding structure from heat. As it lay on the floorboards, the resulting high speed exhaust from the engine tore the batting to pieces and ejected them out the back of the aircraft. These

pieces exiting the fuselage were visible to Jim and were the basis of his call to eject: he thought I'd blown the engine and the compressor blades were coming out the back. He told me later that it wasn't until I had left the aircraft that he realized were the compressor truly disintegrating; the blades would exit the engine sideways, not backwards. Regardless, his call galvanized me into action.

AFTERMATH

In keeping with custom, upon release from the hospital, I make the trek to the Safety Systems Section and present the technician who had packed my parachute with a bottle of his favorite libation. He had repacked it on 22 January 1962 and it had performed flawlessly some six weeks later, allowing me to become a member of a very exclusive group; the Caterpillar Club.

I experienced no mental "angst" as a result of the ejection, although for several months afterward, I noticed that if I reviewed the sequence of events, my palms would get sweaty. However, the memory of the ejection did not go away; it would come back to haunt me a year or so later... but that is a story for another day.

When John wasn't ejecting from RCAF aircraft, he was a member of 434 Squadron, the "other" Sabre Squadron, based at 3(F) Wing Zweibrucken. For two years he was also one of the six members of the "Top Gun" RCAF Guynemer Team in Europe. Back in Canada, he instructed on T-33s and flew two years with the Golden Centennaires, precursor to the Snowbirds. After retiring from the CAF he worked with Irving Oil for several years. He presently resides in Vernon, B.C. where he is the editor of the Vernon Flying Club Newsletter when he is not building the perfect aircraft.

I try to find articles that have a 427 Squadron connection. The connection to this article was generously provided by John. He found out later that 427 pilots Dale Horley and Dick Dunn were walking back to the Squadron Ops after a flight. They looked over when the explosion happened, watched John eject and Dale commented, "Another typical 434 take off".