

Del Rio could have been the Hollywood movie set of a West Texas border town.

It's windy, and the weather tends toward seasonal extremes. A large U.S. Air Force Base 6 miles east of town is named after Jack T. Laughlin, a B-17 pilot

and Del Rio native killed over Java within a few weeks of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor.

Our Thunderbirds Team flies into Laughlin on Oct. 20, 1967, for an air show the next day, honoring 60 or so lieutenants graduating from pilot training.

We go through the standard pre-show routine. Lead and 5 do their show-line survey, while the rest of us make the rounds of hospital and school

visits and give interviews. Next day, proud parents watch as new pilots pin on wings.

At noon, we brief at Base Ops. As usual, an ' inspection team ' comprising base and local dignitaries joins us for a photo session before we step to

the jets.

The film *Bandolero !* is in production near the base, and its stars, Jimmy Stewart and Raquel Welch, show up in the inspection team. Jimmy

Stewart is a USAF Reserve brigadier general, a founder of the Air Force Association and a big hero to all of us.

And Raquel Welch is . . . well, she's Raquel Welch.

We're wearing white show suits, my least-favorite outfit. Lead can choose from among gray, blue, black or white, but today, we look like ' ice cream selling ' Good Humor men.

Plus, even with the air conditioning set to nearly blowing snow balls I'll be working the solo demonstration so hard, sweat soaks my collar.

This would not matter much, except we do a lot of taxiing in-trail.

With only 6 feet. between the end of my pitot boom and No. 5's afterburner, I take a huge load of engine exhaust into the cockpit. Soot clings to

the dampness, leaving a noticeable ' ring around the collar ' when wearing white.



At Del Rio, I follow my usual routine and roll the collar under

once we have taxied away from the crowd. After the show, I'll roll it back out again,

the chimney-black still there, but now underneath, out of ' show watcher sight.'

We taxi short of the runway for a quick pre-takeoff inspection by a couple of our maintenance troops. As No. 6, I'm flying F-100D serial number

55-3520.

We take the runway, the four-aircraft Diamond in fingertip and Bobby Beckel and I in Element . . 500 ft. back. The Diamond releases brakes at

precisely 1430.

Bobby and I run up engines, my stomach tightening against the surge of isolation and exhilaration that comes before every air show takeoff.

By this time in the season, the Team is really ' clicking along.'

We have a lot of shows under our belt and know what we are doing.



Twenty-one minutes into the event, it's going well--a nice cadence and rhythm. We approach the climax . . the Thunderbirds. signature ' Bomb

Burst.'

My job is to put smoke "pigtails" through the separating formation, doing ' unloaded ' maximum aileron rate rolls in perfect vertical.

Even only a couple vertical rolls require establishing a perfect up-line. But more than a few also requires starting them with a ton of airspeed.

As the Diamond pirouettes into the entry for the Bomb Burst entry . . I grab for altitude . . but seconds later at just the right moment, dive down

after them . . hidden from the crowd . . behind their masking smoke.

The Super Sabre's airspeed builds up fast. The Thunderbirds switched to the F-100 in 1956, making us the world's first supersonic flying team. So

**I have to be mindful of a hard-and-fast absolute rule
: DO NOT go supersonic during the airshow.**

No booming the crowd.

So, I need to stay sub-sonic.

On the other hand . . just barely subsonic.

Hmmmm. Let's say . . Mach 0.99.

The biggest mistake I can make is to be early. The Diamond is about to break in all four directions. And if I get there too soon, I don't have an exit

strategy. If I'm too late it looks ugly.

Today, my timing looks good, so I light the ' burner . . start pulling back into a perfect vertical climb . . not looking but guessing it was very close

to a thoroughly practiced 6.5 G pull up.

If I get it right, I'll hit the apex of the Bomb Burst 5 seconds . Then immediately after the Diamond separates . . snap the throttle out of ' burner '

to get the smoke going . . airplane perfectly vertical . . going very fast.

As the Diamond pilots track away from one another to the four points of the compass . . I'll put on those lazy, lovely vertical pigtails Then cut off

the smoke while figuring out how best to make a good-looking slow-speed recovery to normal flight.

But at Del Rio . . it doesn't turn out right.

When I started that aggressive pull into the vertical . . the Super Sabre . .

just . . . **b-l-e-w d-a-m-n-e-d u-p !**

Now, F-100 pilots are accustomed to loud noises . . because its afterburner can ' bang ' pretty hard as the afterburner's raw fuel ignites.

It's also fairly common for its engine compressor to stall . . to force a violent cough of rejected air from its intake.

Flame belches out the oval nose--which will definitely wake you up at night--and the shock can kick your feet off the rudder pedals.

Any F-100 pilot who hears a loud " **BANG !** " automatically thinks : 'compressor stall ' So he unloads centrifugal force . . allowing ram air to

travel in the right direction.

SO, INSTINCTIVELY . . the explosion caused me to relax back stick-pressure . . to unload G's from the airplane.

And now, my brain has zoomed fully into one of those fast-forward mental exercises where entire seasons compress into seconds . . tree leaves

change color . . as you're looking.

I ease the stick forward seemingly lethargic way . . even having time to consider :

" THIS IS

NOT A

COMPRESSOR STALL ! "

In retrospect, the airplane had already unloaded itself, making my remedy superfluous,

But there was instantly . . significant pilot lore at work here.

No matter what else happens . . fly the airplane. Forget all about lift and drag and thrust and gravity. Just fly the damn airplane . . until the last

piece stops moving. Good old 55-3520 has quit flying.

But I have not quit flying !

Now there's **FIRE !**

Not just a little smoke. **Flames fill the cockpit. I have to**

eject. I grab the seat handles and tug up, firing the canopy and exposing ejection

triggers on each side of the handles.

I yanked both triggers and immediately feel the seat catapult into the slip stream.

Seat-separation is automatic . . too fast to track . . the seat disappearing as I curl into a semi-fetal posture to absorb the parachute's opening

shock. Jump school helps here . . and I kind of congratulate myself on perfect body position.

Then the chute snaps open--much too quickly--jolting me back to real time and short-circuiting transition from stark terror . . to giddy elation,

the evil Siamese twins of parachute jumping.

My helmet is gone. And I look up to see a couple of chute panels are torn, several shroud lines severed. And there's one large rip in the can-

opy's crown.

I'll be coming down a bit quicker.

Going to land in the infield, near show-center. Have to figure out the wind, then try to quickly collapse the chute reducing the threat of being

dragged along the crude desert .

**I slammed into the dirt . . instantly getting dragged .
. I focused on collapsing that damn chute !**

Finally, I stand up, thinking I'm in one piece. And here comes a blue van with some of our mechanics in it. While

simultaneously the huge ram-

ifications of what's happened so quickly . . begins sinking in.

In 14 years and 1,000-plus air shows, the Team has been cunning enough to do all our metal-bending during our training sessions . . and out

of sight.

This is our first accident in front of a crowd.

And the ' honor ' is mine.

I gather my gear and climb into the van. Someone suggested immediately taking me to the base hospital. But my brain's still functioning and I

told him : ' *No.* ' *Let's tell the ground crew I'm OK first.* "

So we stop, I get out of the van, shake hands, toss the crew chiefs a false smile and highly insincere ' thumbs-up. '

Jimmy Stewart is still there and comes over to say nice things. Raquel hasn't stayed for the show, so no air-kiss. Our narrator, Mike Miller, stops

and jokingly tells me . . maybe we should probably leave ' the **THING** . . you just performed . . out of the next Thunderbird airshow . . ' though it

was interesting to watch.

That's when I found out I'd ' jerked the wings off ' a Super Sabre.

On most modern fighters, the wings are well behind the pilot. You can see them in the rear view mirror or if you look back, but otherwise they're

not in your field of view. Of course, I had been watching the Diamond, ahead and well above me. Therefore I hadn't seen my swept wings ' pop ' off.

All I knew was the airplane exploded.

The F-100 has a large fuel tank in the fuselage. It's on top of the wing 's center section . . forward of the engine.

When both wings popped off the airplane . . its raw fuel was inhaled directly into its full-throttled engine.

Everything exploded around me . . into . . a ' fire ball.'

The shock wave from the blast propagated up the air intake . . and ' b-l-e-w o-f-f ' the first 6 feet of F-100's nose. The tail of the jet also was

badly damaged, setting free the drag chute.

And as the F-100's drag chute came fluttering down . . some in the crowd believed my personal parachute had failed.

After exploding, briefly pumped raw flames through the cockpit-pressurization system entering the cockpit at the pilot's shoe level . . and

sent flames scorching the back of his head.

My flying boots . . shiny for an ROTC guy . . charred beyond fixing. And I my neck . . where I'd rolled my collar underneath . . had been roasted

bright red.

I was barely subsonic . . when the wings failed. But with the nose blown off, the F-100 became a fairly blunt object and would have slowed quickly.

On the other hand, I remained with the aircraft just nano-seconds after the explosion . . hadn't time to decelerate

much. So . . when I came out

of the jet, wind blast grabbed my helmet, rotated it 90 degrees and ripped it off my head.

It was found on the ground with the visor down, oxygen mask hooked up and chin strap still fastened. As the helmet rotated, the sturdy neck

strap rasped my raw fuel burned neck . . caused the fuel burned neck to bleed more than a bit.

During airshows, the Team always has their ' zero-delay ' parachute lanyards hooked up to the airplane . . giving us the quickest possible chute

deployment . . explaining why my chute opened so fast . . too fast, as it turned out.

Because it was connected to my parachute . . the ejection seat tore through a few nylon fabric panels.

The immediate opening at very high speed was certainly harsher than normal. And as my torso ' horse whipped around ' aligning with the chute's

risers, the tough straps did further damage to the back of my neck . . the body part apparently singled out for retribution.

Walking into the base hospital, I'm startled by my image in a full-length mirror. Above, a sign says : " Check Your Military Appearance."

Mine looks like I've crawled into a burlap bag with a mountain lion. The white show suit is a goner, the cockpit fire having given it a base-coat

of charcoal gray accented by blood . . with a dressing of dirt, grass and sagebrush stain.

Being dragged along the ground accounted for all the camouflage. But I hadn't realized my neck was bleeding so much. I look like the main

course in a throat slasher movie -- ' *The Solo Pilot From Hell.*'

They keep me in the hospital overnight. The Team visits, and Mike Miller smuggles in a dry martini in a half-pint milk carton.

Everybody's leaving for Nellis AFB the next morning. So I tell the hospital people I'm leaving, too, and ask our Slotman, Jack Dickey, to pack my

stuff at the motel. The 1967 show season is over.

After I ' punched out' my broken aircraft remained on a ballistic trajectory . . scattering parts along the extended flight path into the Texas desert.

Most of the engine and the main fuselage section impacted about 2 miles down range from my initial pull-up spot. All the bits and pieces landed

on government soil, and there was no injury or property damage.

My aircraft was wiped out.

And I signed a hand-receipt for \$ 696,989.

But . . if there is a good kind of accident, this was it. Nobody was hurt, and all the scrap metal was collected for post-game analysis.

The Super Sabre's wings mate into a reinforced box at the center of the fuselage . . and it's usually the strongest part of the airplane.

When my aircraft's wing center box was inspected, it was found to have failed. North American Rockwell, the

**manufacturer, tested the box
on a bend-and-stretch machine.**

**And it broke during the test at an equivalent load of 6.5
G Same as the aerobatic flight I was in when both Super
Sabre's wings whipped off**

**. . not quite above the wide open-mouths of the airshow
crowd.**

**It shouldn't have happened, since the F-100's maximum load
limit is 7.33 G. But my F-100's wing center box had
fractured along a fatigue crack.**

***And there were about (30) thirty more fatigue cracks in the
vicinity.***

**Among other past accidents . . various F-100 losses in Vietnam
looked suspiciously similar.**

**The recovery from a dive-bomb pass is a lot like my high-
speed, high-G pull-up into the Bomb Burst. In the Vietnam
accidents, the pieces had not**

**been recovered, and the aircraft were written off as combat
losses.**

**Later, specialists found considerable fatigue damage in the
wing center boxes of our other Thunderbird aircraft. USAF
immediately put a 4 G limit**

**on the F-100 and initiated a program to run all the aircraft
through depot modification to beef up the wing center box.**

**So my hairy accident almost certainly served to save other
pilots lives after revealing a serious structural weakness in the
Super Sabre.**

Merrill A. [Tony] McPeak

Ed. Tom Weeks : USAF General Merrill A. McPeak also flew F-100, F-104, F-4, F-111, F-15 and F-16 fighters, participated in nearly 200 airshows as

the Thunderbird's solo pilot . . ' Tony ' flew 269 combat missions in Vietnam as an attack pilot and as a FAC high-speed forward air controller. He

commanded the Misty FACs, 20th Fighter Wing, Twelfth Air Force and Pacific Air Command, completing his career as U.S. Air Force Chief of Staff.

Source : Aviation Week & Space Technology :

' *Contrails* '

[*abridged*]