

HERDING CATTLE

LOW AND FAST IN A CENTURY-SERIES FIGHTER

Flight Training Magazine

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Illustration by Sarah Hanson

In the mid-1970s, the U.S. Air Force was looking for new airspace in which to conduct low-level, high-speed training. Existing routes were being crowded by urban sprawl, Victor airways, airport control zones, and a host of other factors.

The Upper Peninsula of Michigan had caught the eye of someone at the Pentagon as an area that might still be on the edge of the frontier, and could be fertile ground for such an operation. For some reason, the National Guard Bureau down the hall was brought into the concept; it then passed this off to the Michigan Air National Guard, since it encompassed their airspace.

At the time, I was your basic guard bum with the 127th Tactical Fighter Wing at Selfridge Air National Guard Base, seeking a job as an airline pilot when no one was hiring. The unit was flying North American F-100s at the time. While I was officially the wing navigation and life support officer, I was essentially the gopher for anything required. Summoned to the Pentagon, I was assigned to a six-month temporary technician position of employment to make the new military training routes happen.

I sat down with a sectional chart of the area and drew a five-mile radius around every city, town, and village. Next I included schools, airports, radio towers, restricted airspace, state and national parks, and anything else that could be classified as other than a sparsely populated area. Using what remained—and there appeared little of it—I attempted to connect a continuous line of doglegs from a start point to a target.

The Air Force was seeking two separate routes. The proposed parameters for usage of 500 feet above ground level (agl) and 420 knots were window dressing for the real intended usage—which was 200-foot, “on the deck” ops.

After eking out two separate corridors in reverse directions, the proposal required an in-depth assessment of the decibel levels emitted from the various fighter-type aircraft that would be flying the route, as well as the pollutants emitted at the power levels necessary to sustain the intended 420-knot airspeed. I leaned heavily upon the engineers at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base for the necessary data to fill this square.

Next—a detailed written narrative describing the area to be flown over was required.

An in-depth description of the area could be obtained only by flying over it. This was a blank check to go survey the real estate as necessary. Given an F-100D for this purpose and without a wingman, I was alone and unarmed. The flight plan I filed gave specifics to time en route and fuel aboard, but routing as vague as “VFR (visual flight rules), Upper Peninsula, Michigan.” The only semblance of official Air Force business was a planned refueling at K.I. Sawyer Air Force Base (now Sawyer International Airport in Marquette). In peacetime, flying did not get any better than this.

It was a perfect day for sightseeing and after passing over the thumb of Michigan, I cancelled instrument flight rules with Cleveland Center, and descended to basic clearance over Lake Huron toward the eastern tip of the Upper Peninsula. Time and distance were critical at this point, as navigation was solely by dead reckoning, and the first turn point on the route was located just beside the U.S.-Canada border. This was during the height of the Cold War and in the days before the magic of GPS navigation and moving-map displays. By pure chance, a Russian freighter, trading with Canada, was steaming nearly parallel to my track and I more or less passed beneath its starboard bridge wing—to show the flag, of course.

Nearing the northern shore, I pulled up to a respectable altitude and commenced to fly contour while I thundered over the pencil line that had been drawn on the chart. Although it was considered early spring in most parts of the United States, here the area still appeared to be gripped by winter, with a significant absence of humanity—which was the sole reason for me being here.

Finally it was time for the last and most critical hurdle: a joint meeting with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Michigan Department of Natural Resources. After initial brief pleasantries, I was immediately questioned on my knowledge of the Kirtland’s warbler, a small bird on the endangered species list that seasonally commutes between Northern Michigan and the Bahamas. They referred to the bird by its Latin name, *Setophaga Kirtlandii*. They were

greatly concerned about the potential for creating a stampeding effect upon wildlife by the transit of a jet fighter at the proposed altitude and decibel noise level. I countered that while initially startling to both man and beast, it was extremely brief as an event and similar to that of a thunderclap. While sudden in occurrence, its duration ceased as quickly as it was recognized.

A problem was immediately voiced about the second leg of the route. A bald eagles' nest was located within three miles of the drawn centerline. Proceeding to the map room, which reminded me of a high school gymnasium, we walked over charts of the U.P. in stocking feet. The nest was readily located and graphically displayed with various data depicted about it as if a surface-to-air missile site.

"We had an active nest here last summer," I was informed. "With three eaglets!"

"Three eaglets?" I said. "How are you aware of that?"

"Oh, we go out and count them every year," was the casual response.

"Really?" I said. "Isn't that rather dangerous—climbing up into the upper branches of a tree and being attacked by a mother eagle in the process?"

"Oh, no—we use a helicopter to count them."

Here these people were having an issue with the noise created by a jet aircraft a mile or two distant from the nest, while they were out hovering about the forest canopy, counting beaks in a nest while creating downdrafts of more than 80 knots in the process.

Having vented my spleen regarding their means of accounting, I was near certain that the entire project would have to be scrapped. Surprisingly, a month later, DNR and Fish and Wildlife responded neutrally, voicing no objection to the proposal. Before final submission to Air Force headquarters for approval and subsequent publication with the FAA, however, the two routes required a flight check that would be flown as a practice tactical sortie, to confirm their parameters.

Once again, I was handed the keys to an aircraft, with no questions being asked, for the purpose of making it all happen. Shortly after takeoff, I cancelled IFR and proceeded by pilotage to the start point of the first route, at the northern tip of the thumb of Michigan. Shortly thereafter, I glanced over the canopy rail and observed an entire section of fenced land where more than 500 head of cattle were grazing.

I decided to put to the test the possibility of animals stampeding because of jet noise. Yanking the jet around for alignment, I dropped down to 200 feet agl and pushed up the power to pass over the field at more than 400 knots—while engaging the afterburner for added affect. As the ground streaked by in a blur, I pulled up into a barrel roll at the far end of the fence line and tilted my head back over my left shoulder to look at where I had just been.

The sight reminded me of an old-time Western movie with a large number of buffaloes charging across an open plain. Already a small trail of dust was distinguishable behind what appeared to be the entire herd, hell-bent on going someplace—anyplace—en masse. The initial

thought of this entire horde breaching a barbed-wire fence left me with the vision of having to eat hamburger for the rest of my life as the result of damages incurred.

Throughout the remainder of the flight I dreaded the thought of what might await me upon landing. The camouflaged paint scheme of the airplane lacked sufficient stealth to hide the perpetrator, and being the sole aircraft flying from the squadron that afternoon, it left no chance for claiming innocence. I fully expected the wing commander to meet me at the aircraft and strip me of my wings.

After stop-cocking the throttle in the chocks and sheepishly entering flight operations, I waited for the hammer to fall, but it mysteriously never occurred. Apparently the cattle were not so dumb as to impale themselves upon a barbed-wire fence, no matter what the fright—whether it was caused by predators, lightning strikes, helicopters, or even F-100s. And the low-level military training routes that were the reason for the cattle-herding flight? They ultimately were approved and charted—and appear to survive today, in part if not in their entirety, as VR1628 and VR1648.

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