60 seconds airborne: the end of Sabre 26710

Air Facts Journal

March 6, 1962. Jim and I showed 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.

The airplane was "slightly deficient in power," but what's the worst that could happen?

Unserviceable on landing, my aircraft was still down and had been replaced by another.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.

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.

We rounded the corner onto runway 03 and lined up echelon right for the formation takeoff. Takeoff 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 he was ready to go.

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 showed Jim glued to the right wing. At 110 knots, the nose was rotated to the takeoff position with lift-off occurring at 130 knots. Gear and flaps were selected up and the climb established. I noted Jim still tucked in tight as we approached the Alert Hangar.

As we passed over the end of the runway at about two hundred feet above ground level, a massive explosion (accompanied by a transitory smell of smoke) was 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..."

I quickly scanned the instrument panel looking for an answer to the loss of power: the deceleration was now robbing me of airspeed and with a best glide around 185 knots, I was shortly going to have to start giving up precious altitude for airspeed. The only anomaly noted during the scan was that the engine RPM was now sitting at one hundred percent, a setting I had not commanded. Out of the corner of my eye, I caught 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 wanted to hear from a number two. The urgency conveyed in those words implied a dire emergency: I turned in the cockpit and looked over my left shoulder towards the tail to check for smoke or flame. There was none. I did 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 was momentarily unsure as to my next move.

Other than not being shoved somewhere, there was 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 demanded my attention. My decision had been made for me: I had both the forward fire warning light and the aft fire warning light telling me that something has gone drastically wrong in the engine compartment.

I mentally ticked 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 transmitted “I’m getting out”. Jim replied: “Affirmative, EJECT!”

Things happened fast now: I ducked my head to prevent losing it, at the same time raising the left seat handle to blow the canopy. Accompanied by a rush of air, the canopy was gone. I leaned back and placed my head firmly against the headrest and my feet in the seat footrests; with the sides of the aircraft midway between my shoulder and elbow, I was now sitting in the open. As I placed my fingers around the trigger, I remembered that I didn’t have my visor down to protect against the windblast; I instinctively closed my eyes and squeezed.

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.

The initial impact and debris field.

At this point, it seemed prudent to open my eyes: I had stabilized and was face down with a perspective of the ground that is normally limited to the skydiving fraternity. There was 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 was: “This is going to be close.”

As I reached for the manual “D” ring, the automatic system activated: the ‘chute deployed and snapped me into an upright position. I looked up and took note that I had a fully inflated canopy, then looked down between my feet and saw the ground rushing up. Noise ahead caused 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 noticed that I was having trouble inhaling; not being plugged into the aircraft oxygen system means having to overcome a valve spring to breathe: I disconnected my oxygen mask and placed my hands on the risers.

The ground was really close now; I mentally went 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 was rushing up at me; I renewed my grip on the risers and…

Wheels and the engine just visible at the top left.

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 had landed like I was released from a very tall cow.

After about twenty seconds, I had recovered enough to get up and try to get rid of the parachute and seat pack: Jim was circling overhead trying to ascertain my well being and I didn't want him stalling in on top of me as has happened before. The 'chute was no problem, but the seat pack did not want to release: the connectors must have no downward pull on them to disconnect. One released but the other would not and I was left trying to walk around with the seat pack dangling off my side, banging into my thigh with every step. Jim came by once more, then left: I never did find out if he continued on with the mission or landed.

About five minutes later, a squadron technician arrived: 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 tossed everything into his back seat and headed for the airport.

I spent the night in the hospital where my squadron mates ensure I had enough liquid to prevent dehydration. I had suffered only a hairline fracture to one vertebrae and a slightly detached retina that was picked up during a routine eye exam several months later. I was back in the air in three weeks.

The cause of the accident came 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 instrument panel, a little worse for wear.

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 was the compressor truly disintegrating; the blades would exit the engine sideways, not backwards. Regardless, his call galvanized me into action.

In keeping with custom, upon release from the hospital, I made the trek to the Safety Systems Section and presented the technician who had packed my parachute with a bottle of his favorite libation. He had repacked it on January 22, 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.