

PLAGUED BY GOOD LUCK

THE FLYING WAS A CHALLENGE. Since none of the F-86s had a second cockpit, there was no way an instructor could ride along prior to solo and help with the first few flights. We could only read the books and spend time in the cockpits on the ground. When the time came, we just got into one of the planes and took off with an instructor flying behind us in his own plane. Unfortunately our schedule had been delayed for a few days by bad weather, and this particular event had to be scheduled for early on a Saturday morning.

Well, the instructors had enjoyed a big party the night before, and mine was in no shape to fly. We both started our engines and lined up on the end of the runway. I started to roll, but he didn't. He just said, "Have a good flight, my engine doesn't sound right." By the time I landed, he had gone home to "sleep it off".

This was a kick; the first airplane I had flown with an afterburner. I was off the ground before I realized it. I pulled the nose up, and it really climbed. The controls were so responsive that, when I moved the stick to the side, it would roll twice before I could stop it. I pulled "Gs" in a turn until I blacked out; it would turn on a dime. I was a FIGHTER PILOT, and I thought I was invincible! - Yeah, right.

And then I remembered what my instructor, the Chaplain, and the wing commander back in Texas said about being the most dangerous people on earth at this stage. I realized that the take-off had been easy, but I had never landed one of these things. I looked down at the field and saw a bunch of guys trying to get lined up with the runway, trying to get their flaps and landing gear down at the same time and trying to get the damned things slowed down. The mobile control unit at the end of the runway was firing off warning flares left and right.

Luckily, I still had lots of fuel and remembered to try some simulated landings at altitude. This helped to get me calmed down and let those guys in the landing pattern get on the ground. I got down O.K. but forgot to deploy the drag chute after touchdown. Just after I turned off the runway, mobile control called and said, "You forgot to pop your chute." Well, better late than never, so I popped it then. The controller called back and said, "Smart ass!"

Aside from the unreliability of the single-jet engines in those days, the electronic boxes were just as prone to failure. This was

SHARPENING OUR SWORDS

prior to solid state technology and all the “black boxes” were filled with vacuum tubes. By flying around with unreliable electronic instruments, we compounded the engine problem, but we didn’t know any better since this was all we had to work with at the time. I kept up my search for life insurance without much success.

When I mentioned insurance to one of the instructors, he gave me the phone number of a salesman up in Birmingham, Alabama. That guy had one of his local buddies stop by to see me. The deal was, they would sell me a policy but it would probably be rejected unless the head office overlooked my occupation for the first 90 days. After that they couldn’t cancel. He said that the batting average was less than 50%. We applied, and I got it! ...plagued by good luck again!

There was a lot of instrument training under the hood with an instructor in the front seat of the T-33. We got to the point where all he did was start the engine. We would taxi, take-off, fly all sorts of complicated maneuvers and land without ever looking outside (no peeking!). Most of us got to a level of instrument flying proficiency that we never attained again throughout our careers.

We could feel pretty safe with an instructor in the front seat; if something went wrong, he could take care of anything (Or so we thought!). One day I was up with my instructor, Jim Flogmeister (Mr. Cool and Unshakable), in some pretty bad weather. I was flying the airplane from under the hood when the engine just quit. I thought, no sweat, he’ll figure this out. He yelled, “OH SHIT! WE FLAMED OUT!” Well, he got really scared; he was flailing around the cockpit, screaming for directions. The guy went over the edge!

Finally he got the engine started with a bang and a roar, and the temperatures went above the max (not good!). He told me to keep flying the plane while he kept the engine running. By then my confidence in him was shattered, and I just knew we were gonna’ DIE! I was breathing so hard my mouth got too dry to talk. We finally broke out of the clouds with the runway dead ahead and landed. (So much for calm, capable instructors who would save your life!)

We flew during the days only long enough...