

Confession Corner



I swear, It's the truth!

We at AAHS have the privilege of being part of an industry that produces history full of near misses, amazing technological breakthroughs, tough determination and the display of human inventiveness and foolishness in equal measure. As common as tie downs on the ramp are the anecdotes and stories told by hangar neighbors, visiting pilots and old codgers guarding the water cooler, recounting impossible tales of ground loops, belly landings, near misses and ornery passengers, bad radios and inclement weather.

These campfire stories, short and terse, long-winded, hilarious, absolute truths or something in between, are the yarns, as aviation kids we'd listen to with round eyes, awed and inspired, scared straight or incredulous ("that's not possible ... is it?") and, fervently hoping to never find ourselves in that position.

Documenting these "histories" will make up our new Confession Corner column in the Journal, and we sincerely hope you find these entertaining. We encourage you, too, to submit your stories for this column!

The Day I Killed the Dentist Jon Goldenbaum

Tidewater Virginia in August is an uncomfortable place. The heat and humidity can be intolerable, particularly when wearing a long sleeve flight suit. However, wearing a sticky flight suit came with the best job I ever had: commander of a front-line F-15 Squadron. For two years, I was lucky enough to be the commander of the 71st Tactical Fighter Squadron at Langley AFB, Virginia. Langley is a beautiful place on the shores of the Chesapeake Bay, but in August most folks in Tidewater are looking for air conditioners and shade. For over 17 years I had worked my way from dumb wingman to flight lead, to instructor, to assistant ops officer, to ops officer in six different fighter squadrons at USAF bases all over the world. Finally I was one of few selected to command an F-15 squadron. I could not believe my luck – I was in heaven.

On this humid August day, I was more than busy, scheduled to fly an afternoon sortie with every minute of my morning filled with meetings. Why the meetings? Because in less than a week, I was to lead the squadron out to Nellis AFB in Las Vegas to participate in a Red Flag Exercise. Red Flag is a huge aerial exercise where military squadrons from all over the U.S and NATO simulate a full-scale air war. Nellis is the ideal place for this mass exercise, the empty desert lands of the Nellis Ranges

north of Las Vegas contain huge expanses of restricted airspace where the military can operate at will without conflicting civilian traffic. Red Flag was started after the Viet Nam war by a new breed of Air Force planners who vowed to never make the mistakes of Viet Nam where politicians ran the war and aircrew were mired in red tape – unable to innovate or question. The intent of Red Flag was to season young aircrew in most realistic exercises, preparing them for an inevitable future war. Statistics proved that the vast majority of aircrew combat losses occurred in a first five missions. Therefore, the real goal of Red Flag was to give



The author, Jon Goldenbaum, at the time of this story.

You do not have to be an AAHS member to submit a story, anyone can. Do not get impatient if your story does not appear in the next issue of the AAHS Journal. Only a few will appear in each issue of Confession Corner. I will be looking forward to reading and enjoying your stories.

Send your submissions to:

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Managing Editor
email: editor@aahs-online.org.

Do not be deterred if you are like many of us old computer illiterate types, just have one of your children, grandchildren or a friend type and e-mail your story.

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aircrew these first five missions in realistic simulations before they actually got to combat.

Thus my day was packed as it had been for the months leading up to our deployment. I started the day at seven in the morning with Chief Stallings, our Maintenance Supervisor. Stallings was a gruff, no-nonsense chief master sergeant, who had complete responsibility of our 24 F-15s, along with all the shops, tools, spares and most importantly the several hundred enlisted mechanics and technicians who kept them in the air. Sure, there were plenty of maintenance officers and even a few colonels in the outfit, but they mostly got in the way; the Chief ran the show. Over coffee, the Chief reviewed the problems and status of all the airplanes going on the trip and gave me his forecasts on how things would look at the end of the week when we actually went. After the Chief and I were through, my Ops Officer, "Grovel" Cooke, sat down with me to review the training status of the 30 pilots who would go.

In flying squadrons, there are a myriad of training events that each pilot has to perform to remain "mission ready." Only mission ready pilots could go to a Red Flag, or for that matter, sit alert, or be considered a full-up, useful fighter pilot. These events could range from instrument currency to air refueling from a tanker, to a wide range of tactical maneuvering exercises: dogfighting from single ships to multiple formation fights, to weapons deliveries.

Every training sortie flown is designed to get as many of these events completed as possible. There was never a day where pilots went up and played unorganized grab butt. And of course, everything had to be recorded on standard forms in each pilot's training records. These forms had all the required events organized by category and when each item was accomplished, the pilot would check a box and fill out the date he completed it. For obvious reasons, these events were called "squares" by the pilots and training sorties were planned to "fill the squares."

The young pilots (we called them puppy dogs) would make sure they filled their squares, even if it was done with a pencil only. Most young buck fighter pilots got away with pencil whipping their squares, particularly if their fellow pups didn't squeal. This was never done by more senior guys, we knew if we got caught lying, it would be the end of our career; integrity was expected of commanders.

So for each pilot going to Red Flag, Grovel had a list of remaining squares to be filled before we left. Grovel then put up a flying schedule designed to get the squares filled for the remaining delinquent pilots.

The reason I was flying that afternoon was because I was one of the few pilots who still had squares to fill. I lacked three low altitude intercepts or "lowats" as we referred to them. We hardly ever practiced lowat, it was not something usually done by high, fast fighters like the F-15, and their two dimensional maneuvering was boring compared to full up dogfighting. But nevertheless, there would be lots of low altitude combat at Red Flag, so all the pilots needed to be lowat current.

About noon I wandered up to the duty desk to see what Grovel had scheduled me for. It was a two ship mission to the Dare County low level range with Major "Odie" Odegard as my wingman. Odie needed some lowat squares as well. I

noted that I was scheduled to fly in a two seater F-15D, we had two in each squadron. No problem, they flew just as well as the standard single seaters. Odie and I got more coffee and headed for the briefing room to do our pre-flight briefing.

We were just settling into our chairs when Grovel showed up. "Boss, things have changed. The Wing Commander just called, he wants to put an incentive ride in your pit (back seat). "Seems they have been trying to get this incentive ride off for a few weeks and we keep stiffing them to fill Red Flag squares." We had no choice, when the Wing Commander wants something; things happen.

All fighter wings give incentive rides to their very best non-flying folks. For example, young enlisted people, civilian Air Force employees or non-flying officers were given incentive rides to recognize their unusually good work. These rides also were great tools in making Wing personnel feel important and part of the team. Usually the squadron got about one every other month or so, they were not very frequent, so not a big problem for us. The usual incentive ride was a dedicated sortie designed to be easy on a first-timer in the cockpit, lots of straight and level flying, no undue G pulling, and always a supersonic run to give the awardee bragging rights. The ride is accompanied by all the frills: a photographer, cake, handshake from the Wing Commander, a supersonic plaque, etc.

However, it was a really bad idea to put an incentive ride in a real training sortie, most untrained folks were not used to the crushing G's, pressure breathing through an oxygen mask and all the other things hostile to the human body that are part of high performance jet flying.

So I was flabbergasted. "Who the hell is going with me on a lowat sortie?" I asked Grovel.

"Pearly White" he laughed.

Now Pearly White was actually Capt. Marie White, one of the base dentists at Langley. Grovel laughed because we all knew Pearly well. She was married to one of our young squadron pilots, Capt. Steve "Blackie" White. They had met in college, and were recently married. Steve had always wanted to be a fighter pilot. He enrolled in ROTC and eventually got his commission and his orders to flight school. Marie was also a ROTC cadet, but she was interested in an Air Force career as a pathway to either medical or dental school. After undergraduate school, she was accepted to dental school, and after becoming a dentist, went on active duty to her fulfill her Air Force commitment. During this time, Steve went through pilot training, then off to fighter lead-in school, and did well enough to win a coveted slot to F-15 school. It took them both about the same amount of time to finish their respective training and when Steve received orders to Langley AFB, Marie requested the same. Happily it worked out, they were soon married.

Dr. Pearly was a smart, professional young woman, but a bit outspoken. Her take on fighter pilots (compared to doctors or dentists) was that they were sort of grown-up high school jocks, self-absorbed in their macho world. At squadron social events she enjoyed poking fun at the "little boys and their supersonic toys" and mostly treated fighter pilots as adolescents – in hindsight, her assessment was probably spot on. Now Blackie on the other hand, was in hog heaven, his life couldn't be better,



McDonnell Douglas F-15D, similar to the one the author was flying in this story. (Photo by Steven Miller, AAHS-D10187)

hard flying during the day, followed by a few beers with the boys, then home for a nap before dinner. Pearly thought little of these slothful ways and never hesitated to compare her queen-bee status to his as a drone. Anyway, despite their differences, they were happy enough.

Five minutes later, Pearly showed up, looking fetching in a flight suit, excited and ready to go. She had spent her morning at the Life Support Section, getting rudimentary parachute training, practicing breathing through an oxygen mask and getting fitted with her flight suit, survival vest, G-suit, parachute harness and a helmet. She was well liked around the Wing, so the Life Support guys, took extra time to make a custom vinyl stick-on name for her helmet that said "Dr. Pearly White," as well as a cartoon rendering of a smiling tooth. Odie and I went through our standard briefing guide, covering the usual subjects, assigning frequencies, altitudes, emergency procedures, etc. We took extra time to explain intercept procedures, radar operations and weapons parameters to Pearly, doing our best to keep her involved. She was attentive, asked intelligent questions and seemed eager to get in the air.

However, I had nagging doubts about what we were about to undertake. By now, the afternoon heat had begun to build cumulus clouds that meant that our flight at low altitude underneath the clouds was guaranteed to be hot and very bumpy. The F-15 has a pretty good air conditioner, but it can easily get overwhelmed at low altitude in 100 degree heat. Not a good set up for Pearly's first flight.

Soon, the three of us picked up our gear, got in the bread-truck flight-line taxi and were off to our respective jets. When we got to our aircraft, I was astounded to see a crowd of at least 50 people standing in the shade underneath the airplane waiting greet Pearly. Looked like the entire Dental Department and many of the senior hospital commanders had gathered to see her off. After lots of photos, handshakes and quips, Sgt. Bryce Allison, my capable crew chief helped Pearly into her seat in the back, strapped her in and gave her the customary good luck pat on the shoulder as he went down the ladder. I followed up to have a last minute review with her on how the intercom worked, where the ejection handles were and other pertinent emergency switches and handles. Finally, I climbed into the front. The chief strapped me in and we were ready to go. By

this time, sweat was pouring off my forehead, putting on the helmet was no fun and the bon voyage crowd was leaving, chased away by the heat.

I got the engines started, closed the canopy, and waited for the air conditioner to give us some relief. I tried the intercom. Pearly came back immediately loud and clear. I encouraged her to keep her mask dangling by only one clasp and instructed her to bring the mask up to her face only when she wanted to talk. No sense in clamping the mask

yet, we could do that just before we took off. I knew it would be uncomfortable for her with the mask clasped – it takes some getting used to. I watched her intently in my rear view mirror. I could see she was comfortable with attaching and releasing the mask.

The two seat F-15D had an intercom system that was always on, you did not need to push a button to talk, you had a "hot mike" all the time. If you coughed, or hummed or made comments to yourself, the other pilot could always hear it. Additionally, all your conversations or noise on the intercom or radio was recorded on a VHS cassette that also recorded video of the view forward through the pilot's Heads-Up Display (HUD). This was most valuable after a flight. These tapes were used in debriefing the details of how a flight went, radar work, simulated weapons shots, radio chatter, etc.

I continued with all the cockpit tasks and checks necessary to get the jet on line, completing flight control and radar checks with Sgt. Allison who was plugged into an external headset so we could talk. After five minutes we were ready, the air conditioner was putting out a little cool air and everything appeared in order.

"Iron check," I transmitted on the radio.

"Two" replied Odie, ready as well.

"Langley ground, Iron 01, flight of two, ready to taxi with Foxtrot."

"Iron, cleared to taxi" replied the tower and we were on our way to the runway.

Now Pearly seemed really stoked, you sit up really high off the ground in an F-15, and the view from the huge bubble canopy was panoramic. "This is really great," said Pearly, "can't believe I'm getting a chance to do this."

Odie slid in beside us at the last chance area at the end of the runway, the ground crew made a last inspection of both jets looking for leaks or anything abnormal. Finally, thumb ups for both jets. I made sure that Pearly hooked up both sides of her mask and we were ready to fly.

"Langley tower, Iron flight ready to go on 25."

"Iron cleared for takeoff, maintain runway heading, contact Norfolk departure on button 3."

We lined up on the center line, pushed the power up. Odie gave me a "yes" up and down head motion. I gave him a head

nod, together we released brakes and two mighty F-15s roared down the runway in formation.

"Cool" she said as she looked to the side to see Odie in perfect fingertip formation on my right wing. "He is so close I can see the color of his eyes."

"Are they bloodshot like normal?" I asked.

As we climbed, she was most impressed with the feeling of speed as we punched through the scattered cumulus clouds at about 2,000 feet in our climb. We banked left in an easy sweeping turn as we passed through about 15,000 feet. I kicked Odie out to route and checked in with Washington Center. All was going well, Pearly was obviously enjoying herself, comfortable and chatty. We levelled at FL240, cruising easily southbound, over Norfolk, Suffolk, then crossed into North Carolina with a great view of Nags Head and the Outer Banks. She was really enjoying the tour. Odie was line abreast in tactical formation. He clicked the mic button twice to get my attention. I told Pearly to watch Odie who showed off with a series of high rate aileron rolls for her amusement.

"Can we do some?" She asked.

"Sure", I said as I gave her two quick rolls.

"Wow, looks like the horizon is spinning, not us" she said. So far, she was doing fine.

"Washington, Iron is ready for a VFR descent into the Dare County restricted area," I called.

"Roger Iron, cleared descent, remain VMC on climb out and call on this frequency for your clearance," they replied.

Throttles back, with Odie in line abreast formation, we descended through the broken cloud layer at about 4,000 feet. As soon as we penetrated the cloud layer, the bumps began and we entered the milky haze normal for summertime in coastal North Carolina. Prior to this descent it had been perfectly smooth and cool above the clouds at FL240, now I knew the fun was about to begin.

We levelled at about 1,000 feet AGL to begin our intercepts. Every time we flew under a cumulus cloud, the thermals gave us a jarring bump, and the heat began to increase in the cockpit. I could now see that Pearly was not so comfortable, at each jarring thermal Pearly gave an involuntary "eek" sound, her hands tightly gripping the hand-holds on each side of her canopy rail.

"Iron two, cleared to the east point, Iron is heading west."

"Two" Odie acknowledged.

We split up, Odie heading to his respective start point about 30 miles from mine. It was really bumpy, getting hot and the visibility was horrible under the clouds, as I had worried.

"You doing OK back there?" I asked Pearly. She said nothing gave only a head nod, but I could tell she was not enjoying things quite as much. Over the intercom, I could hear her breathing heavily, soon I could hear small, ladylike belches.

"OK Pearly, not much longer, I'm turning back east so Odie can make his first run on us." My intent was to try to keep her mind occupied on the flight, so I kept up a chatter with her explaining how Odie was searching for us on his radar; he would not see us in this milky haze until he got within a few miles.

"Judy," called Odie, he had us radar locked, and would

soon start his conversion to our six to take a simulated shot. Normally I would have begun an aggressive turn into him to give him a challenge but with Pearly in the back, I hardly went over 20 degrees of bank. Soon I saw Odie, pulling hard past our 4 o'clock, with enough G's on the airplane turn to create moisture streamers off each wingtip.

"Fox Two Lima kill," said Odie as he took his simulated sidewinder missile shot.

"Iron, knock it off," I called, the signal to stop that intercept.

"Two," he acknowledged.

"OK, reposition, Two you go west, One will go east".

"Two."

It was now our turn to head to our start point, then do an intercept on Odie. Pearly was dead silent in the back seat, again, her labored breathing, belches, and slight choking sounds spoke volumes. She was going to be airsick.

"OK Pearly, we will be going straight and level for the next few minutes while we reposition, why don't you move your oxygen regulator to the 100 percent oxygen setting, the cool oxygen will make you feel a bit better. Another weak head nod, nothing else as we headed east. I gave her more commentary on the radar, missile parameters; anything to distract her.

I got to our point, turned west and called "fights on," Odie acknowledged and we ran at each other, 30 miles apart going 350 knots each in the bumpy, hot air.

"OK Pearly, see that dot on the radar screen about half way of the scope? That's Odie." Again I thought I could distract her. Nothing. "OK I'm taking a lock, and we will go for an AIM 7 radar missile in his face, then I'll convert to his six for an AIM 9 heater." I explained how I put the cursor over the Odie's radar signature, designated him, and got a radar lock. Soon I had an in-range triangle in the HUD and the target designator box had a little dot in it. That dot was Odie's F-15. Now that I had him in sight, I pulled the nose up as gently as possible, rolled past the vertical as he passed abeam us and pulled to convert to his six. Being as gentle as I could, we still pulled 4 G's.

"Do the G straining maneuver you learned this morning, it will help," I told Pearly. But she was beyond straining maneuvers, all I could hear in the intercom was a loud wail like an Arab woman in mourning. The wailing was replaced by a sharp choking sound, then more moaning and gagging as I rolled out in Odie's six and took my AIM 9 shot. "Fox Two, knock it off."

"Two" replied Odie.

Suddenly the intercom was filled with a most horrible sound as Pearly violently threw up into her face mask. I looked in the mirror to see her head lolling, streams of puke jetting past the rubber seal of her face mask. Then, more retching, as she continued to spew, filling her mask, exploding past the seal.

"Pearly, unclip your mask, unclip your mask," I shouted. I was more than alarmed. "Damn it, unclip your mask, now!" I screamed into the intercom, afraid she would drown in her own vomit. With slight relief, I saw her hand weakly fumbling with a clip and with great difficulty, she unclipped it. Now a flood of vomit spewed forth, unhindered by the mask. It was everywhere, her lap, the rear instrument panel, and the entire rear cockpit.

The smell of vomit was overpowering, I was getting nauseous myself. All thoughts of filling squares with more lowat intercepts was gone. I needed to get her home, fast! I rolled out, and called Odie. "Odie, Pearly has lost it, she is really sick, we gotta go." Then more formally: "Iron One is returning to Langley, and declaring an emergency. Two, take spacing and head back on your own, we will proceed ahead of you."

"Two", acknowledged Odie. "Also please call the command post, tell them Iron One is 20 minutes out with a physiological emergency. Insure they have an ambulance waiting in the chocks".

"Wilco boss," said Odie, who promptly got out of our way.

"Pearly, can you hear me? Can you breathe?" No answer, only gurgling. Then her head rolled one last time and slumped down, so low that I could only see the top of her helmet. She was not moving at all, then even the gurgling stopped. I could hear nothing, not even her breathing. "Damn, damn, damn" I said under my breath," I think I just killed the base dentist."

Needless to say, I lit the burners, punched up through the clouds and headed straight for home. "Washington Center, Iron One, single ship, leaving Dare County for FL 250, declaring an emergency."

Washington came right back, "Iron One radar contact, cleared direct to Langley, maintain the altitude of your choice. Say nature of emergency and souls on board."

"We have a physiological emergency and an incapacitated crewmember, two souls on board, one plus hour fuel," I replied. Within minutes I stuck the nose down and left the power up, the airspeed running as high as it wanted. I was in a hurry.

"Pearly, can you hear me?" Again, nothing, not a sound from her, not a movement. Washington handed me off the Langley approach who quickly sent me to the tower. "Langley Tower Iron One, 10 mile straight in to runway 25, runway in sight."

"Cleared to land Iron, status of your emergency?" Tower asked.

"Emergency still active, will roll out on 25 then an expedited taxi to the ramp."

"Roger, approved as requested, any taxiway, no need to contact ground." Tower was efficient and concerned.

Four miles out I put out the boards, slowed below gear speed and slammed down the gear and flaps. I crossed the threshold, touched down, aero braked with the nose in the air, slowed and turned off the runway on the shortest taxi way to the ramp.

I tried again, "Pearly can you hear me? We are down and we'll be out in a minute or so." No answer, no sound, no movement. I taxied faster than I ever had, screaming around corners, squealing tires.

When we got close to the ramp, my heart sank. At our parking area there must have been over 100 people, the whole damned hospital was out to meet her, I could see flowers, photographers, cake and champagne. At almost the same time we arrived at the chocks, an ambulance slid around the corner, lights blazing, siren screaming.

Shocked, the crowd parted to make room for us both. Sgt Bryce Allison waved me into the parking spot and gave me the cut signal. I opened the canopy, relieved to breathe fresh air. Bryce put the ladder up and the crowd surged forward. I pulled off my helmet, stood up in my seat and turned around so I could see Pearly. She was out cold, motionless, the smell of puke was overpowering. The whole rear cockpit and inside of the canopy coated with vomit.

"My God sir, should I unstrap her? Allison asked.

"As quickly as you can, first put her ejection seat pins in, I'm sure she left the seat hot," I said. Just behind Allison, two ambulance attendants looked on anxiously. "Get the gurney closer guys," I said. "As soon as the Crew Chief gets her unstrapped, lift her down, she is unconscious." Alison unbuckled her helmet strap, unplugged her mic cord and gingerly lifted her helmet off. I was shocked. Her hair was matted, her eye makeup running down her puke covered face. She looked like Alice Cooper. They got her unstrapped, and gently handed her down to place her on the gurney. The crowd recoiled in horror at the sight and smell of her, gasps and tears followed.

The full colonel hospital commander was goggle eyed, he looked up at me incredulous "What the hell happened, Goldy?"

"Airsick sir, very very airsick," was all I could stammer.

Well they took her away, hooked to an IV. I was greatly relieved to see her breathing. The crowd raced after the ambulance, the cake and champagne forgotten. I crawled down from the cockpit just as the Wing Commander drove up and the explanations began.

Poor Bryce worked for an entire week to clean up the airplane. In the end, it was beyond his efforts, they put the airplane in a back hangar and disassembled the rear cockpit piece by pieces, carefully washing then checking all electronics and systems. It didn't fly for two months.

Pearly stayed the hospital for two days, on a constant IV to replenish her fluids and get her electrolytes up to normal. Her fighter pilot husband Blackie spent hours by her bedside, happily, as the young will. She bounced right back. Just before we left for Red Flag, Pearly was released and Blackie got a chance to fly again. When I saw him the morning we left I asked about Pearly.

"Oh she is fine now sir, still a bit woozy, but she was on her feet in the apartment when I got back from flying." Blackie went on, "I was worried when I came in the door, and I had drunk a few beers after flying and expected to catch the usual hell. "But astonishingly, when I walked in the door, she ran to hug me and asked if I was OK. 'Uh, sure,' Blackie replied, most confused. Then she led me to the couch, plumped up a few pillows and had me lay down." 'I know exactly how you feel dear, you must be exhausted,' she said. 'Let me get you a cold beer, just relax, would a cold cloth on your brow help? Dinner will be ready soon.'

Then the final punch line from Capt. Steve "Blackie" White. "Sir, you think there is any way we could get her an incentive ride every few months?" →