

# My Last Flight

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Every now and then, there comes a time for me to recount my last flight at the controls of a military aircraft. I decided I should write it all down, and this file is the result. If you're reading this, it's because I sent you a hot link (or perhaps because of the magic of Google's web-crawling).



This is AH-105, an F-8H Crusader from the VF-111 Sundowners. Pilot is Chuck Scott,  
Photo by John Allman, who replaced me after I crashed AH-107.

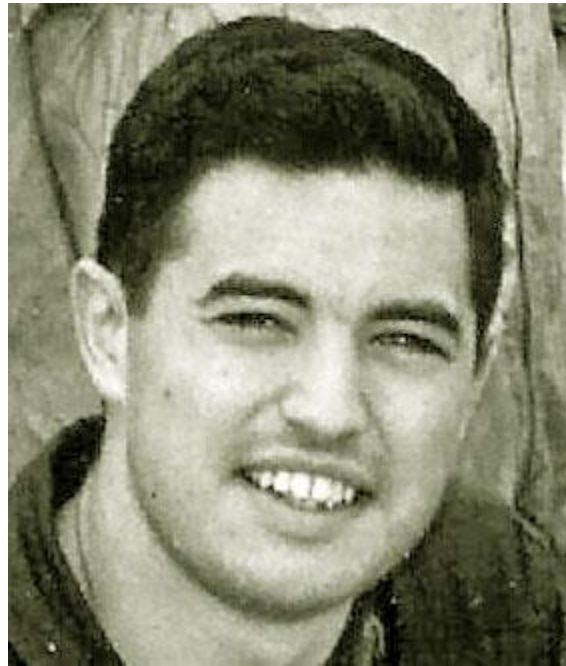
A flight of four launched out of NAS Miramar on a beautiful, clear California fall morning, October 3, 1968. It was a flight of four F-8H Crusaders belonging to the VF-111 Sundowners, out for an air-to-ground weapons training flight.

The F-8's cockpit visibility wasn't the greatest, so you always raised your seat as much as you could. But you didn't want it so high that you would have trouble grabbing the two yellow-and-black-striped handles above your helmet, the handles that fired your ejection seat.

The last thing I always did before taking the runway was make a reflexive grab for the face curtain handles. That turned out to be a useful exercise.

After a short flight east, over the mountains into the southern California desert, we reached the target, radio call sign "Inky Barley." Loaded with both 20mm machine gun ammunition and practice bombs, we set up a race track strafing pattern around the target at 4000 feet, 450 knots.

As the target went past 90 degrees to your left, you'd roll into a 25-degree dive and accelerate to 500 knots as you lined up your gun sight on the target. Since this aircraft lacked a heads-up display, you had to watch the unwinding altimeter out of the corner of your eye. You wanted to be sure you initiated recovery early enough to avoid "controlled flight into terrain." I didn't.



BEFORE: NAS Miramar, Fall 1968

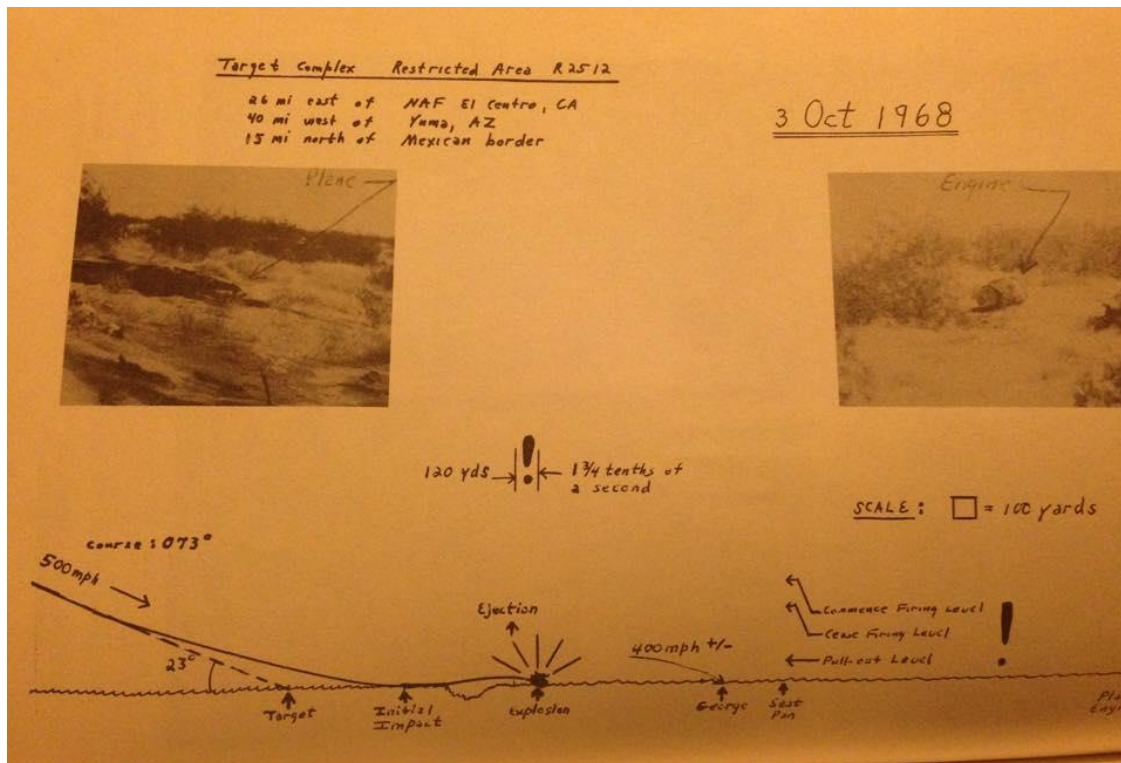
When Tom Garrett, the flight leader, called "last pass," I was determined to "fire out," to expend all my ammunition. Word was that it was a lot of extra work for the aviation ordnance crews to disarm unexpended munitions. Trying to be helpful, I hosed away at the target with the F-8's four Colt 20mm cannons. A phenomenon called target fixation caused me to miss a revolution of the altimeter.

As I pulled four G's to recover, I looked up and to the left, looking for the aircraft ahead of me in the pattern. I have a vague memory of seeing sage brush, zooming by to my lower left. I felt a slight bump, which was the tail of the aircraft brushing a sand dune. I had hit the ground in a wings-level, slightly nose-up attitude, at 500 knots, about 550 mph. I reflexively grabbed for the face curtain.



From the NATOPS manual: firing the ejection seat.

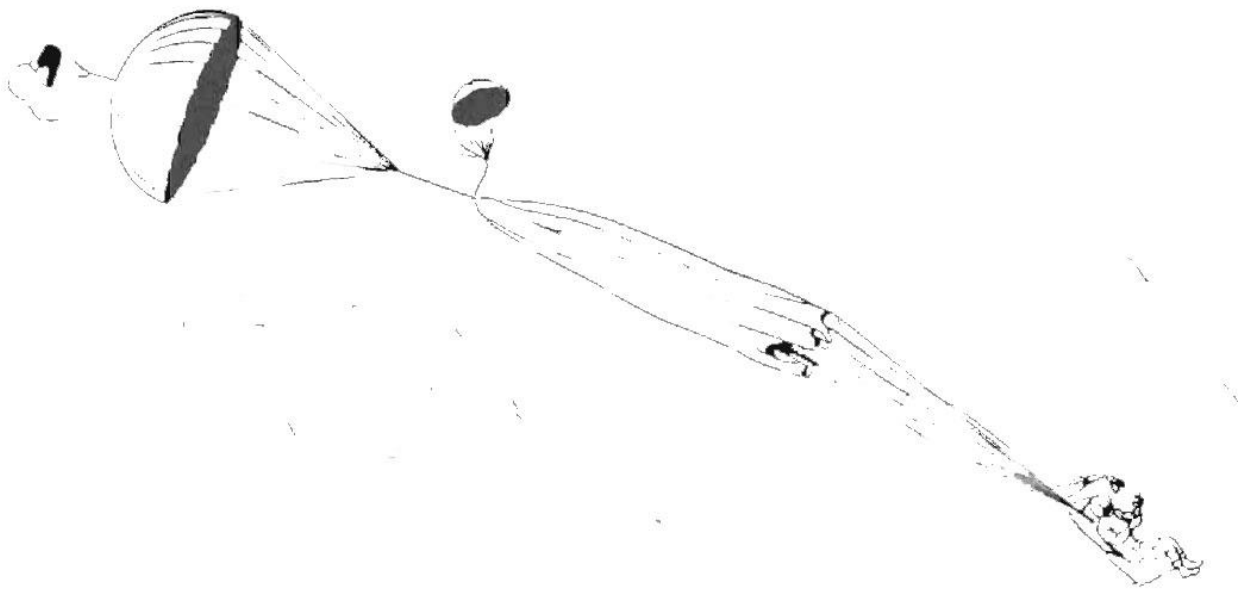
I was strapped into a Martin-Baker Mk-F5A ejection seat, the last of the ballistic models. Pulling the face curtain handles fired a charge that set the seat moving up and out of the cockpit on a telescoping tube. As the seat moved up, two successive charges were fired by the hot gasses from the first. Ideally the three successive charges propelled you high enough for separation from the seat and deployment of your main parachute.



Scan of a diagram drawn by my father.

My situation wasn't ideal. For one thing, ground-level was 100 feet too low for the speed of 500 knots. The seat delayed main chute deployment until a small drogue chute had slowed you down enough to avoid damage to the main chute. But a larger problem was that the ejection gun, the telescoping tube, ruptured as the aircraft was disintegrating. I only got one of the three charges; the other two were recovered unexpended from the wreckage.

I didn't clear the aircraft's vertical tail. It chopped off my right heel like a guillotine.



My situation after being clipped by AH-107 's vertical tail.  
The chute and I separated from the seat before I hit the ground.

My main chute streamed but didn't fill. On the plus side, it snagged in sagebrush, keeping me from tumbling. I hit the ground feet and butt first. Femurs stayed together but tibias and fibulas broke; remaining ankle bones were shattered. The five-inch-thick seat pan, containing life raft and other supplies, acted as a crush-zone, but I still ended up with a fractured pelvis.

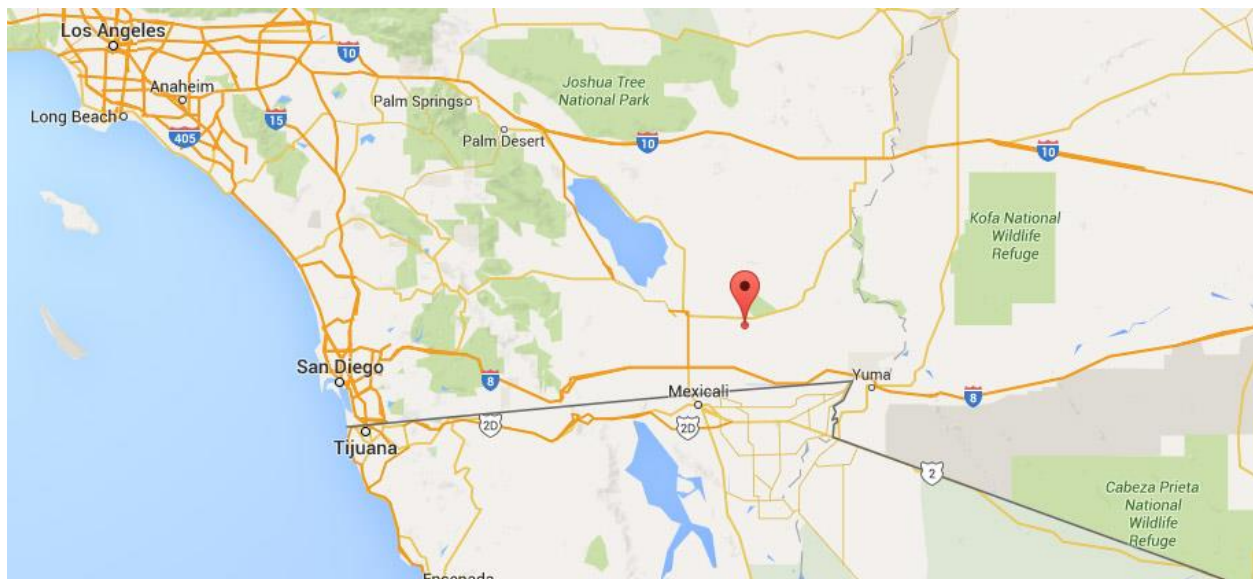
The first thing I remember upon regaining consciousness, face up on my back, was a cool breeze across my face. That wasn't right, because I should have been wearing a hot, rubber oxygen mask. It had been dislodged somewhere along the way. Then I heard the sound of another aircraft, orbiting overhead. That reminded me I had been flying my own aircraft a moment ago.

I was in shock. I felt no pain. I tried to sit up, but the broken pelvis and legs, as well as the parachute harness, made that problematic. I raised my arms and notice that my left forefinger had been dislocated. Well, I didn't particularly want to see that.

I had no sensation of time passing. Next thing I knew, one of the target crew appeared in my field of view. I asked him if I still had any legs. He said I did, but they didn't look so good.

Meanwhile, back in the strafing pattern, my flight leader, Tom Garrett, was directly across from me. He said later that he thought I was pulling out too low. He keyed his mic to say "Pull up," but instead transmitted "Oh shit" as my aircraft erupted into the typical black mushroom cloud.

Recovering quickly, Tom immediately lit burner to climb high enough to get line-of-sight radio contact back to Sundowner base at Miramar. He ordered Hugh Risseuw, the less experienced pilot to return to Miramar independently and the more experienced pilot, Tom Laughter, to orbit low and maintain contact with the target crew.



“Inky Barley,” the last place I landed a military aircraft, about Midway between the Salton Sea and Yuma.

Since there was no rocket exhaust from my ballistic seat and since no chute had blossomed, Tom assumed I was spread over a mile or so with my aircraft. When

he returned to target frequency the target crew reported that I was not only alive but also conscious. Tom got on the horn to MCAS Yuma, some 40 miles to the southeast. Yuma scrambled an H-34 helicopter, but its oil sump chip light came on en route. It had to make an emergency landing in the desert.

Tom then called NAF El Centro. Listening in on tower frequency was a Navy reserve flight surgeon, getting in his required flight time in a C-130 doing touch-and-go landings. He called for a full-stop, transferred to a helicopter, and was on his way to Inky Barley.

All I remember about the helicopter was being loaded into it. I heard somebody cry out in pain. I realized somewhere in my shock-anesthetized brain that it was I.

Back to El Centro and into the C-130 for the flight back west over the mountains to Miramar. Time had no meaning; I was only marginally conscious. At one point, I noticed a placard on the bulkhead, "Do not store body bags aft of frame 58." I asked the doctor what frame we were next to. He told me not to worry about it.

Next thing I know, I'm being transferred to an ambulance bound for Balboa Naval Hospital. I see the faces of squadron mates and CDR Finney, the skipper. "Sorry I fucked up, skipper," I remember saying. "Don't worry about it," he said.



Balboa Naval Hospital. I never saw this view, but I heard  
Many an airplane fly over on final to Lindbergh field.

Next memory is the Balboa ER. The anesthesiologist is explaining that he's about to intubate me. I will feel a choking sensation, he warned, but then the tube would slip into place and everything would be fine. Then he commences shoving a broomstick or something down my throat. Well, hell yeah I felt a choking sensation! Then I tried to tell him that, yes, it did slip into place, and everything was fine. All that come out was a whisper of breath. "Oh, don't try to talk; you can't; the tube goes through your vocal cords." Oh, OK.

I come to in the recovery room or ICU or who knows? The patient is the last to know. Turns out that I have tubes everywhere: a nasogastric tube, wound drains in open reductions of fractures on both legs, a Foley catheter, a cephalic vein IV, and a jugular intracath. I have a plaster cast on my left hand, where the dislocated metacarpophalangeal joint was reduced. I have a splint on my right elbow, where a large laceration was sewn up. I have a plaster boot on my left foot. I have a bivalve cast on my right leg, along with a Steinmann pin through what's left of the heel. And I have an ugly-looking incision from sternum to pubis, thanks to a laparotomy that allowed repair of a lacerated liver.



In the ICU at Balboa Naval Hospital.  
Taken by my parents after the nasogastric tube was pulled.

Thanks to better living through chemistry, the only pain I felt through all this was a dull ache from the fractured pelvis. At one point, I thought I was dying as consciousness slowly faded. Turns out I was only falling asleep.

My orthopedist characterized my recovery as "stormy." That is a euphemism for raging pseudomonas infection in the huge defect that used to be my right heel, plus uremia. My kidneys had shut down—distal tubular necrosis, consequent to shock.

I was raving insane and had to be restrained lest I pull out my IV's. I was told I was about to be dialyzed before my kidneys rebooted and my BUN peaked at 180.

I did a tour in the Balboa ICU. The Red Cross flew my parents out from Maryland, something they do, I later learned, only in situations expected to be terminal. I was recovering from uremia then, so I don't remember much about the visit.

The worst part was being NPO (Latin for *nulla per os*, nothing by mouth). I could have only a shot class of D5W, sugar water, every hour. It's a great weight-loss regimen—see the picture below. I'd live for that shot. The nurses would *never* let me have it early, but they didn't seem bothered if it was late.

Toward the end of my ICU stay, I was visited once by one of the members of my last flight of four, Hugh Risseuw. I enviously watched him finish a cup of coffee. Hmm, there was a container of D5W on my table. He had a cup. Why not? "Hugh, sneak me a slug of water from that jug." There was a little ring of coffee left in the bottom of his cup. After weeks of nothing but sugar water, I still remember that sip as the richest, most exotic thing I have ever tasted. This is when I realized I had turned the corner.

I have a load of hospital stories. I was shipped back home to Maryland to Bethesda Naval Hospital. Finally had my right foot amputated. Met the Navy nurse whom I later married. But this is supposed to be the story of how my last Crusader flight ended. To this day, every time the wheels squeal against the runway, I say to my seat-mate, "Cheated death again!"



AFTER: USNH Bethesda, Spring 1969.  
Cheated death!