

## Goob's F-16 Ejection on 20 June 1997

Ron "Aileron" Yelton suggested I write an accounting of my F-16 GLOC experience back in 1997 to share on his Griffin website. It's been on my To-Do list for a while now. This is based on my recollection of a crazy day in my life nearly 20 years ago now. The 10% rule applies and I was of course sleeping part of the time. Since I'm just getting home from two back-to-back trips, I decided not to attend the Squadron Christmas party this year so at the very least I've taken the time to put this together.

I woke up the morning of 20 June, 1997 after an overnight alert in the trailer. You remember...the single wide hand-me-down from days gone by. I have no idea where the trailer actually came from but I always imagined it was a place where my predecessors pushed it up pretty hard back in the day. Stained carpet, unhinged cabinets, furniture no sane wife would ever allow. But it was a nice place to unwind and I slept there often back then as an "alert trougher". I was First Lieutenant Steve "Goober" Jennings back then living the good life. I had no idea what an exciting day was in store for me that day.

I was not scheduled to fly but that would change. Fallout that morning left a hole in the schedule and LTC Dennis "Meat" Mast asked me if I wanted to fly and of course I said yes. Meat and I had this never ending conversation where he would ask me if I would ever amount to anything and I'd reply that I tried to be successful once but that didn't work out so I joined the Guard.

The training mission was ACM and I was on Anthony "AB" Bourke's wing with Lt. Col. Bob "Grinder" Hervatine providing the Red Air role. We were scheduled to fly over the water that day but sea states were out of limit so we opted to head to R-2508, our normal training area.

We did practice scramble starts and I had the Crew Chief remove the ladder so I strapped myself in to F-16 Block 25 Tail 84-1255. Just like all missions we did a g-awareness turn shortly after entering the airspace. For whatever reason, my g tolerance was very low that day and I found myself straining exceptionally hard to maintain my vision during the moderate g turns. I figured I was getting sick or something and this was the reason for my low g tolerance. Nonetheless, I confirmed my g check was good and we pressed on to our planned engagements. I told myself that I would not pull more than 6 g's that day.

I believe it was the fifth ACM engagement where AB and I notched to the merge. I went "blind sun" as AB and Grinder wrapped it up and because I was low on energy I pushed over and went to full-afterburner to get back some energy and turn back into the fight. But Grinder was not going to allow a 1LT to do such a thing. He found me during my extension and my radar warning receiver went off letting me know he was at my 6-o'clock. In an attempt to avoid getting shot (again!) by the legendary Grinder, I forgot about my 6 g contract I made earlier with myself and started a maximum g break turn to get to the notch. I also pulled back

the throttle to idle to make a Fox 2 shot more difficult for him. I had plenty of smash by then and that's about the last thing I remember before everything went black then silent.

When I woke up things were very quiet and I was experiencing the same numbing/tingling sensation in my cranium that you feel in your arm when you sleep on it too long and lose some circulation. I was somewhat incapacitated but my hands were still on the stick and throttle although I was too weak to move them much.

I knew something bad just happened and I knew something really bad was going to happen if I didn't do something real fast as the ground was coming my way very fast. I found myself watching in a semi-paralyzed state. My muscle coordination and strength were not giving me enough use of my arms and hands to get the nose to track up to the horizon quickly enough. I yelled to try to get my brain to wake up quicker and apparently I had the radio mic keyed since my yell was broadcast over the radio. (When I watched Grinder's HUD video tape later there are those in the Squadron that swear it was more like "a little girl screaming" but whatever the case my yell/scream was me fighting to wake up and do something).

I was slowly waking up but not fast enough. The nose was beginning to track up a bit but I remember thinking that if I do make it, it's going to be real close based on my pitch rate. I also felt that if I stick with it I'd likely be out of safe ejection parameters in a few seconds and I was starting to get ground rush. I decided by best chance for surviving this thing was to focus all my effort on getting my hands to the ejection handle and pulling it. My biggest ejection concern was my speed and if I was too fast for a safe ejection. Although I wanted to know my speed I always referred to the round dial for this and I didn't want to look down to get that piece of information as things were happening too fast. It took all the focus and energy that I had, but I was able to reach between my legs and pull the ejection handle in an act of self preservation - Goober did not want to die that day.

After I pulled the ejection handle, I remember hearing things but unable to see at first. I heard a scream. But this was not my scream this time (I don't think so anyway) and coming from behind me. Later I learned that it was most likely the ejection seat drogue chute, which deploys for about a second during high speed ejections to slow the seat down before the parachute deploys, beating in the wind behind me. Kind of like a tarp beating like crazy in the wind but at such a high frequency it sounded like a scream. I'll never forget that sound.

Shortly after, my parachute opened and I looked down in time to see the aircraft explode below me. I don't remember hearing the crash but I saw the mushroom cloud as the fuel atomized and ignited. It was quiet again and all I heard was the wind on the parachute. I watched the canopy and seat fall towards the ground but I was still waking up from my crazy experience. My neck was sore and I could not use my left arm to do many of the post-ejection procedures. I didn't know if it was broken or dislocated at the time but I was feeling real lucky that I was not in that fireball below. Turned out it was just dislocated but nonetheless my left arm was useless to me. Okay...so I'm supposed to do all that post-ejection stuff we are taught like check the parachute canopy, raise the helmet visor, remove oxygen mask, deploy the seat kit, do a 4-line jettison...all that stuff. Well, Goob's brain was elsewhere like

oh, #\*(\$, what the #@%\* just happened! What am I gonna tell the guys? No, they'll never believe that story. Think harder! But I was almost on the ground already. I'd better try to steer this thing and I can think of a good story once I'm on the ground. But I only have use of my right arm. I looked for the 4-line jettison chords so I could pull them with my good arm but they were sucked up into the riser and not the floppy rabbit ears that were so easy to pull in training. I decided to just pull on the right riser with my good arm to turn into the direction I was traveling so I wouldn't land backwards and bam I did the worst possible parachute landing fall. I did a back first body slam into the side of a rock mountain. It knocked the wind out of me but my helmet saved me from at least a bad headache perhaps more. It made me forget about the pain in my arm for a moment.

The parachute re-inflated and started to pull me uphill because the winds were blowing strong that day but I was able to release both parachute risers using my good arm and I just laid there trying to get my breath back and soak things in. I told myself that even with a little pain and the wind knocked out of myself from my terrible PLF I was damn lucky just to be alive so don't complain. I was able to open my survival kit, find my emergency radio and let AB and Grinder know I was still alive and they started coordinating my transportation which ended up being a helicopter out of China Lake NAS. It was June in Death Valley and about 122 degrees that day. Because I didn't know how long I'd be there I decided to drink some of my water immediately and save the rest for later. The water was as hot as coffee by the time I drank it. But I'd rather be there in the blazing desert heat than in a small raft in a big ocean, if we had gone over the water instead. I was not very far away from the mystery Sliding Rock area. But I didn't see anything man-made in sight. The whole experience had drained me and I felt exhausted.

I believe the helicopter arrived about 3-4 hours later and it was comforting to hear those rotor blades in the distance knowing I would not have to spend the night out there. I was taken to Pinecrest Hospital not too far from China Lake where I spent a few days before being transferred to St. Agnes here in Fresno. Doc William "Buffy" Carveth was there at Pinecrest when I woke up and my arm felt better. To my surprise the first thing he wanted to do was a rectal exam. I was in no position to argue so on went the gloves. He spent a lot of time with me and I really did appreciate having him there.

## SOME AFTER THOUGHTS

I was very lucky that day. First, I was lucky that I survived at all. It was only because it happened at a higher altitude (about 14,000 feet AGL) and I had reduced the throttle to idle that I had enough time to wake up and come to my senses enough to get out of the aircraft. I work for Lockheed Martin as an aircraft accident investigator these days and there have been nearly 30 F-16 GLOC Class A mishaps with less than a handful survivors. If the throttle is at a high power setting (and it normally is for GLOCs), airspeed increases rapidly and the chances of survival reduce dramatically once above 600 knots. I estimated my airspeed at ejection was less than 500 knots based on Grinders last radar hit that showed me around 400 knots and increasing, if I remember correctly. Oh, and it turns out I flew better when I'm sleeping as I

was look-down in the notch and motor-cooled so Grinder was never able to get a shot before he had to continue his turn or risk getting shot by AB. The accident board believed I was inverted and about 45-60 degrees nose low when I ejected. I didn't understand how that could be at first. I was asked what made me think I was pointed nearly vertical (which I had told them earlier) and I told them the ground was not panning and I was aiming at one spot. The only thing that made sense if that were true was that my tunnel vision while waking up made me think I was pointed straight down but actually pointing into the side of a steep mountain while inverted. The little bit of pulling I did on the stick was most likely in the wrong direction and not towards the closest horizon. An inverted ejection may also account for why I saw the canopy and seat fall past me towards the ground. Second, I was lucky because my helmet stayed on protecting my cranium when I body slammed the mountain. My poor parachute landing fall (PLF) was the main reason I stayed in the hospital several days since I dislodged my kidneys on ground impact. Although I think my legs and ankles would have been at risk of injury if I had landed going forward, in that terrain. Third, I'm very fortunate that I was able to strap an F-16 back on a few months later a wiser pilot than before after going through another "special" centrifuge ride at Holloman AFB. I never really had a problem with g's in general but I definitely did the day of the mishap. Since I did a practice scramble start and strapped myself in there is a reasonable chance I never plugged in my oxygen hose. Neither I nor the accident board was able to know this for sure. I was fortunate that Griffin leadership stood behind me because I knew there was the possibility I would not fly again.

The biggest takeaway in my view is that I pushed myself beyond what I was capable of that day. I should have "fessed up" early about my low g tolerance and flew an alternate low g mission or took the bandit role. I took a risk which cost an aircraft and nearly cost me my life. It could have all been avoided if I had used better personal risk management that day.

Later I wrote a short thank you to the Navy helicopter crew that picked me up from the desert. It's attached to the end of this letter. I believe I heard years later that one of the two crews that would have responded to my accident crashed and there were no survivors. I believe I was told they hit a cable in the mountains. I never did figure out if it was the crew that came out for me.

I've always wanted to return to see if I could find my hole in the ground. I was wearing my military issued Casio G-Shock watch that came off during the ejection so perhaps it's still in the desert telling time. That would be a great commercial, right?

Thanks to Life Support and Egress for training the pilots and maintaining the incredible ACES II ejection seat. I owe them beverages for life.

Thanks to then Col. Doug "Link" Moore and Col Alan "Howdy" Heers for going through the pressure of a Safety Investigation Board and Accident Investigation Board and for keeping me in the jet.

Thanks to LTC Tom "Pee-Wee" Westbrook for doing a great job coordinating the Search and Rescue, as he was SOF that day.

Thanks to Doc. William "Buffy" Carveth for being there when I woke up at Ridgecrest Hospital and getting me through those first days.

Thanks to the C-26 folks (Mike "Grinch" Giersch) for the ride home from China Lake.

Thanks to Maj Anthony "AB" Bourke for taking heat for a rogue wingman that wasn't up for the task that day.

Thanks to Mike McNiff for all the medical help before and after my crash. You rock.

I enjoyed being a member of the 144FW for 10 years before I headed off to Fort Worth to work at Lockheed Martin. I've served time in the AF Reserves, Regular Air Force, and the ANG. The 144th will always be the home I will miss the most.

Proud to be a Griffin for Life.

Steve "Goobs" Jennings

144FW 1990-2001

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*DUST DEVILS,*

*22 JULY 1997*

*WHEN SOMETHING GOES WRONG AND YOU FIND YOURSELF UNDER A  
CANOPY IN THE MIDDLE OF THE DESERT, IN MID-JUNE, WITH NOTH-  
ING BUT ROCKS AS FAR AS THE EYE CAN SEE, THE DISTANT SOUND OF  
ROTOR BLADES IS A PLEASING SOUND I'LL NEVER FORGET.*

*SINCERE THANKS TO LT. HOWE, LT. BARKER, AD2 GRAHAM, HM2 GREY*

*1LT STEVEN R. JENNINGS  
194 FIGHTER SQ, FRESNO CA*