

The First Ejection

By Peter Mersky



October 1986

October 1986

It happened on August 9, 1949. Lt. Jack L. Fruin of VF 171 was on a routine training flight after picking up a new F2H Banshee at Cherry Point. Flying at 38,000 feet, Lt. Fruin, “Pappy” to his squadron mates, noticed a spot of frost forming inside his canopy. Soon, the entire inside of the canopy was covered with ice, some of it nearly an inch thick. The cockpit was nearly pitch black.

Pappy brought the Banshee down, thinking the warmer air would defrost the canopy, but suddenly, the rate-of-climb indicator began oscillating and quickly stopped altogether. Then, the whole instrument panel went crazy. Pappy guessed that ice had clogged the outside ports for the pitot-static instruments.

He knew he could keep his wings level, but he couldn't tell whether he was in a dive or climb. The Banshee began buffeting wildly, slamming him around the cockpit. The aircraft was approaching supersonic speed, outside the design limits for the straight-winged F2H.

The young pilot knew he was facing a critical decision: stay with the plane or use the new-fangled ejection seat. Many of the first-generation jet aviators were reluctant to use the seat. The idea of being shot out of their warm comfortable cockpit was not appealing. In addition, Fruin's plane was fresh from the factory. He

wasn't sure if the complicated ejection seat mechanism was even installed correctly.

As the plane's buffeting increased, he made his decision. He put his legs in the stirrups and pulled up the pre-ejection leg braces. Then he reached for the face curtain and pulled, triggering the catapult.

The next thing he knew he was hurtling out of the plane at nearly 600 mph. He knew he had to free-fall for quite a distance to get out of the rarified atmosphere before freezing to death or dying from lack of oxygen. The rip cord was next on his mind, but he couldn't find it. At 15,000 feet, with the ground rushing up at him, he finally found the cord dangling over his side.

With great effort, he yanked the cord with all his might, as the chute opened, jerking him back a few feet. Lt. Fruin floated into a swampy inlet, a few miles from the ocean. He inflated the life raft attached to the chute and climbed in. He then used his hands to paddle to within 100 feet of the marshy ground and began calling for help.

Fortunately, his weak cries were heard by three boys in a rowboat who came to his rescue. They pulled the aviator into their boat and brought him to shore where they had their horses tied. While two rode for help, the third remained with Fruin. A cattle rancher came to his aid and drove him to a hospital 22 miles away.

Besides making the first operational use of an ejection seat in the United States, Lt. Fruin – who later retired as a captain – may also hold the record for the longest free-fall. ◀