

Night Flight

by Roger G Crewse April 24, 1957

It was a black night. All light, terrestrial or celestial, was absorbed in a blotter of heavy snow. I was flying an F-94B two-place all-weather jet interceptor. Dan Rogers, my radar observer, held down the rear cockpit.

We had just missed an approach at K-13, our home base in Korea. The snow was so thick there I hadn't been able to pick up the runway lights as we passed over the field.

We climbed back on top of the overcast, breaking in the clear at twelve thousand. I gave the ground radar station a call. They had been tracking us on their radar scope throughout the approach.

"Hello Elgin, this is Wristpin six zero. We missed our approach at K-13. There is no use to try it again. How is the weather at K-6?"

"Roger six zero," the steady voice of the controller came back. "K-6 is reporting twenty-five hundred overcast, five miles visibility in very light snow. Should be no sweat."

"Elgin from six zero," I replied. "Roger, we'll take it into K-6. Give us pigeons, please."

"Six zero from Elgin pigeons to K-6, 240 degrees, fifty miles. We'll advise K-6 tower you're coming in."

I turned to the heading and leveled at twenty thousand feet. Above the overcast it was a beautiful night. The moon was almost full, plum-shaped, and its cold, pale yellow light was reflected softly by the tops of the clouds below us. Only the brighter stars were visible. But underneath those clouds was weather that only an obscure corner of the earth, such as Korea, could have generated.

I scanned the cockpit instruments. Each illuminated by its own small red lamp, they appeared suspended in blackness. The indicators for the engine confirmed that it was operating correctly. I checked the fuel. We had two hundred and fifty gallons remaining, and unless something unforeseeable occurred, fuel would be no problem. I could hear the steady sound of Dan's breath. The intercom was always on so that the sound of every grunt, groan, breath, or belch was faithfully carried from one cockpit to the other. "How's the set looking, Dan?" I asked.

"It's still looking good," he drawled. "I should be able to pick up the field in our radar when we get on final."

Dan was from Magnolia, Arkansas (a Confederate flag flew over his bunk). He was as good a man on the scope as I had ever known. We had been flying together for over two years. I had complete faith in his ability to make sense out of those confusing mosaics of light that

appeared on his radar scope. He was intelligent, soft-spoken, and all business when in the air. Elgin came on the radio again.

“Hello, six zero, this is Elgin.” There was just a hint of urgency in the Controller’s voice this time. “K-6 Tower advises that this snow is increasing there, but if you can make it in the next fifteen minutes, you should be OK. We have your position twenty miles out. Start letdown in approximately thirty seconds.”

I acknowledged and reduced the power in preparation for the descent.

“Wristpin six zero,” this was Elgin again. “Start rate of descent now. Turn starboard to three three zero. K-6 dead ahead thirty five; give us a call passing through 5000’.”

“They are taking us straight in,” I said to Dan. “Let me know as soon as you pick up anything on the scope.” I opened the speed brakes, lowered the nose, and began descending at four thousand feet per minute. We entered the tops of the clouds once again, and I gave full attention to the instruments. As we went deeper into the overcast, the air became more turbulent, and the weird blue fingers of St. Elmo’s fire began picking at the windscreen. Occasionally a finger would break off and work slowly up the windscreen, then off the canopy into the night. Even though it is nothing more than static electricity, St. Elmo’s fire is difficult to ignore.

I called passing through five thousand, and Elgin gave minor heading corrections. The controller also advised us to level at fifteen hundred feet.

At two thousand feet, we were not out yet. I began to slow the descent. When I leveled at fifteen hundred, I could still see the glow of the wingtip running lights haloed by the clouds. Elgin advised us we were now twelve miles out and to continue our descent to five hundred feet.

Dan’s voice came over the interphone. ‘I’m picking the field up now, five degrees starboard at eight thousand yards.’”

“Are you sure you’ve got it?” I asked.

“Roger,” he replied. “I’ve got it loud and clear.”

I adjusted the heading and began glancing up occasionally from the instruments, trying to pick out the lights of the runway.

“Four thousand yards head ahead, Dan said.

“No joy,” I answered.

“Two thousand.”

I gave my full attention to the blackness ahead. Still nothing.

“One thousand dead ahead, and it’s going off my scope,” Dan said.

I let the aircraft settle another two hundred feet. Now we were less than three hundred above the ground. I could not make out a single light. I held the heading. Then I saw something. First, just a spark of light. By looking out the side of the canopy, I could see down. We were passing over the runway, too high to land. I hadn't been able to see it soon enough.

I added power, pulled up the gear, and began to climb straight ahead. I adjusted the pitch of the aircraft so that we could climb slightly and pick up speed at the same time. At a thousand feet or so, I began to turn to the right. Dan's voice, tense, urgent, snapped over the interphone.

"Pull it up, Rog! I'm painting real estate two thousand yards ahead and above us."

I slammed the throttle outboard, engaging the afterburner, and felt the plane lurch forward with the added power. I pulled the nose up as high as I dared.

"More, Rog, more! We're not going to make it!" Dan said desperately.

I reefed back on the stick until the rate of climb was six thousand feet per minute. I held the current attitude dangerously nose high. My eyes flicked to the airspeed. It was below one-fifty and lowering rapidly. The plane would stall at one-twenty. We couldn't hold the climb much longer.

"OK," Dan said, exhaling heavily as he did so. "We're clear!"

"It was my fault," I said, "I forgot about those hills. I owe you a beer for that one."

I lowered the nose quickly to obtain a better airspeed and continued the climb. Once again, we popped out of the overcast. That last approach had soaked up another hundred gallons of fuel. We had enough for about thirty minutes of altitude.

"Hello, Elgin," I said. "This is Wristpin six zero. The weather has moved into K-6, and we were not able to make the landing. Is there a K site in Korea within our range and with decent weather? We are down to 150 gallons."

"Six zero from Elgin, K-8 is reporting clear with visibility unlimited. Your position is ninety miles north of K-8 at the present time. What are your intentions?"

That was a good question. My intentions were to get on the ground as soon as possible in a minimum number of pieces. We might make K-8 if the moon was right and the devil did not interfere.

"Roger Elgin, this is six zero. "I'm turning south. We'll level at twenty thousand. Keep me advised of our distance out."

As we bored our way through the night, there was nothing to do but sit there, wait, and watch the fuel counter click off the gallons used. One hundred remaining, eighty, sixty. The red warning light on the fuselage tank indicator flickered on. This meant only fifty gallons were remaining now. Elgin advised us we were sixty miles out.

Ahead now, I could see the weather was clearing, and as we came out over the open area, I could pick up the distant trace of light that was K-8. I called the tower.

“Hello, K-8 Tower. This is the Wristpin six zero. We are forty miles north, at minimum fuel. You had better alert your rescue people. It’s going to be very close. Right now, it doesn’t look as if we are going to be able to make it.”

Those words came out almost involuntarily. This was the first time I had let myself admit that we probably would have to eject. I was aware of the interruption in Dan’s breathing as he heard the words.

“Let’s run through our ejection procedures. Just make sure we don’t forget them in the heat of battle,” I said.

“Roger,” Dan answered with a calmness that neither he nor I possessed. “I stow and lock the radar central; tighten my harness; pull the left seat handle; helmet visor down...he continued, but I really wasn’t listening.

It looked as if we were about thirty miles out, and I could make out the rough Korean coastline very clearly. The Yellow Sea was streaked with moonlight. It looked cold and hostile, a symbol of the antipathy this night had held for us thus far.

The field was laid out east to west, running from the very lip of the coast inland. I could see that the shortest approach would be from over the water. Even though the temperature of the water was thirty-five degrees---not a pleasant thought in conjunction with an ejection---we would have to come in from over the water if we were to make it at all.

I pulled the power back to idle and started a glide. The fuselage tank now had only fifteen gallons. Even at idle, the engines would burn over two gallons per minute.

I started to arc to the field, turning out over the water. We were now down to eight thousand. As we lined up with the runway, I lowered the gear. We were high. I put out some flaps. The plane was settling in nicely. I glanced at the fuel gauge. The needle was flopping on nothing. I sat with guts knotted; I was rigid. We were too low for an ejection---it was in the mill now.

We were going to be short. I had to have more power. I advanced the throttle; felt it take momentarily. Then the engine quit. With the exception of the wheezing of our breathing exposed by the interphone, a quiet existed that is rarely experienced in an aircraft. We were approaching the runway. “We’re going to make it!” Dan said.

And we did.