

F-15 BAILOUT

By Capt. Brian Udell

F-15E Fighter Pilot

April 18, Capt. Brian Udell, an F-15E fighter pilot from Mountain Home Air Force Base, Idaho, will acknowledge the second anniversary of that fateful day. There will be no celebration, because he lost a friend and coworker, weapons systems officer Capt. Dennis White. Yet on that bittersweet night, Udell miraculously survived one of the fastest known ejections in history at more than 780 mph.

But exposing his virtually unprotected body to supersonic speeds had its price. And Udell's story is incredible.

Assigned to Seymour-Johnson AFB, N.C., at the time, Udell and White took off at about 8:45 p.m. in a four-ship formation. The F-15E's were to fly out over the Atlantic, split into two groups and engage each other as simulated friendly and enemy forces, part of routine training.

"Two of us would head north, and two of us would head south," Udell said, simulating the route of the aircraft with his hands. "Then we'd turn around and come at each other like we were in a jousting match."

Actually, at night, the aircraft used radar to ensure they'd never come dangerously close to each other. At a predetermined distance, they would turn around, head back and do it all over again. Udell and White were in one of those turns when their tragic saga began.

"I was reading my heads-up display, and it showed me in a 60 degree turn with my nose tilted 10 degrees down and going 400 knots at 24,000 feet. Perfect," Udell said. "But as we're in this turn, I start hearing a wind rush, sort of like the sound you hear when you're increasing your speed down the highway and have to turn up your radio. But in a jet, this kind of wind rush usually comes when you're accelerating in excess of 500 knots."

Checking the heads-up display again, everything looked good. But Udell and White agreed something was wrong.

"I flipped on the electronic altitude direction indicator," the 33 year old Udell said. "It tells you if you're going up or down, making a right or left turn, going upside down or right side up, how fast you're going, and what altitude you're at. And it says that I'm headed straight for the earth at about 600 knots (nearly 700 mph)."

"If I'd waited for more than a half second, I would have impacted the water still in the seat."

Because he didn't know which set of instruments was telling the truth, Udell moved the stick back and forth to feel the response of the airplane. The heads-up display stayed the same. The other display changed. That meant the second set of instruments functioned properly. It also meant they were screaming toward earth like a giant lawn dart.

"By this time, we were just above 10,000 feet and exceeding 600 knots," Udell said. "When we do our preflight briefs, we talk about 10,000 feet being the minimum altitude we go before ejecting out of an out-of-control aircraft, and 600 knots is the maximum speed for a safe ejection in the ACES II ejection seat. So I had to make a quick decision. With it being pitch black and having no horizon to work with, I gave the order: 'Bail out! Bail out! Bail out!' "

Traveling at 1,200 feet per second, faster than a lot of rifle bullets, by the time the canopy blew off, White ejected at 4,500 feet. With the aircraft still picking up speed (more than 780 mph) Udell ejected at 3,000 feet.

"I made the decision to bail out at 10,000 feet, got into good position and pulled the handles at 6,000 feet, left the aircraft at 3,000 feet, and got my parachute at just under 1,000 feet. All that happened in a matter of a few seconds," he said, taking a deep breath. "So if you crunch the numbers, I had about a half second to spare. "If I'd waited for more than a half second, I would have impacted the water still in the seat," he added, clapping his hands together in a sobering smack that echoed through the room.

As Udell floated to earth at the end of a parachute, he couldn't remember pounding into those granite-hard shock waves as his unarmored body pierced the sonic wall. Those three seconds that sent all 190 pounds of him hurtling at a supersonic velocity appear mercifully lost forever.

"I don't know if it was because of the trauma my body went through or the terror of 'Holy s-, this is happening,' " he said, his eyes widening. "But I'm glad I don't remember punching out."

Slowly descending, Udell felt as though he'd been hit by a train. Had anyone seen him at that moment, they might have agreed.

His helmet and oxygen mask had been ripped from his head, and his earplugs snatched from his ears. His gloves and watch also were torn off. All his pens and flight suit

patches were gone. His wallet and a water bottle had blasted through the bottom of his G-suit pockets, with the zippers still closed. Underneath his flight suit, his T-shirt looked as though someone had taken a razor blade and shredded it. And the laces on his boots were imbedded into the leather.

Udell felt some pain, but had no clue to the extent of his injuries. He began going through his post-ejection checklist.

"First you check the parachute canopy to make sure it's deployed properly," said Udell, who credits much of his survival to Air Force life support, egress, buddy care and survival training. "But since it was too dark to see and I wasn't dropping like a rock, I figured it must be OK. Next you make sure your visor and oxygen mask are off. That was no problem, since my entire helmet had been blown off in the ejection."

Then he attempted to inflate his life preserver, but found it shredded. He figured he'd better reel in the life raft that automatically deploys during ejection to ensure he had some kind of flotation device when entering the water. That's when he discovered his left arm was injured. He hauled in the raft with his right arm and his teeth.

"Just about the time I got my hand on the raft, I hit the water," Udell said.

His struggle to get into the raft began. He'd been trained in different techniques to board the one man boat, but that had been under the assumption he'd have four good limbs. He was down to one, and even that one had been dislocated and somehow popped back into place. He made several unsuccessful attempts, before he simply stopped and started praying.

"This was no put-your-hands-together-and-bow-your-head-praying," Udell said candidly. "This was face-to-face, 'Hey God, I need your help!' kind of praying."

He gave it one more try and somehow managed to inch his way onto the raft. Sitting in the rubber boat, he had his right leg straight out in front of him. But from the knee down, it involuntarily dangled at a 90-degree angle over the right side of the vessel. With his right arm he grabbed his lower leg and jerked it into the raft. It flopped 180 degrees over his left leg with his upper right leg still pointed forward. He adjusted it until the entire limb aligned in the same direction. Then he did the same for his left ankle, which had been bent totally backwards.

"There was just nothing holding them together," he said, shaking his head. "Even the skin had stretched out."

Once he had immobilized his legs and his left arm, Udell searched his 6-foot-1 frame for other injuries. Finding nothing that appeared life-threatening, he went into prevent-shock mode. He drank some water out of an emergency pack that automatically releases during ejection, then tried to get warm.

"When the raft deploys, only the main donut ring inflates," he explained. "You have to manually inflate the bottom and the side spray shields. Without the bottom inflated, I'm still sitting in the water, and without the sides, the wind and waves crash over me. At that point, I'm chilled to the bone and the cold bothered me more than my injuries." Udell began to inflate the bottom of the raft.

"But when I first put the tube in my mouth and tried to blow, I couldn't create a seal around the tube," he said. "I reached up and touched my face for the first time. It felt like a dish of Playdough. My lips were especially deformed. The blood vessels in my face had burst under the pressure of the slip stream and my whole face was swollen. It had no definition."

Despite his desperate situation, he had to laugh. He envisioned himself looking like Mush Mouth from the cartoon Fat Albert.

"I stuck the tube back in my mouth," he said, still chuckling. "The only way I could get a seal around it was to hold the tube with my teeth and clamp my hand down around my lips. My lips fit into the first three fingers of my hand, so they were out there pretty far."

Despite getting a head-rush like he'd blown up a couple hundred party balloons, Udell inflated the bottom of the raft, then the spray shields, until he had formed a floating pup tent - his own little cocoon. And after bailing out water with plastic bags from his survival kit, he finally began to warm.

"I was exhausted and wanted to sleep, but was afraid I'd never wake up again," he said.

Meanwhile, the three other F-15E crews, who hadn't discovered right away that one of their \$40 million aircraft now sat at the bottom of the Atlantic Ocean, incredibly had

managed to pinpoint the crash site within two miles based on the last communications from the craft. The Coast Guard was on the way.

Even though his bulging lips could barely form the syllables, Udell kept hollering, "Dennis!" ... No answer. He also thought of his wife, Kristi, who was four months pregnant with their first child.

Udell spent four hours in the water before a Coast Guard helicopter found him. Using an emergency radio, he directed them to his location. "But I asked them not to get too close, because I didn't want the rotor wash to knock me out of the raft," he said.

Aviation Survivalman 2nd Class Jim Peterson fished Udell out of the raft and into a litter.

"He was in a lot of pain, but he just bit his lip and dealt with it," Peterson said. "I even bumped his legs with my flippers a few times while dragging him to the litter, but he never complained. For being all busted up, he was a very strong man."

Actually, Udell admitted that he weakened so much that he had trouble pushing the radio button. And now cold struck again.

"When he [Peterson] secured me in the litter, the helicopter flew overhead and lowered the wench. I felt like I was in a typhoon," Udell said. "The rotors kicked up the wind and waves, and it felt like needles were hitting me. But worse yet, the rotors acted as a giant air conditioner, giving me another big chill. As they're hauling me up, the basket starts spinning, until finally they pull me aboard. I owe those guys a lot."

Once in the helicopter, the Coast Guard rescue crew rushed the downed pilot to the nearest hospital in Wilmington, N.C.

"When I arrived at the hospital, it seemed like 20 or 30 doctors and nurses surrounded me," Udell said. "Within seconds I was buck naked and they were taking all kinds of X-rays. And all I could think about was that good ol' mom advice, 'Make sure you have clean underwear, because you never know when you'll be in an accident.' "

Soon an orthopedic surgeon walks in. He looks at the X-ray. "Right knee dislocated. Left ankle broken. Left arm dislocated," the doctor said.

"I'm thinking, 'All right, pain medication,' "Udell said wistfully. "But without a hi, hello or how are you, that doctor walks up to me, grabs my right knee, and POP! He snaps it back into place. I start screaming. Then he goes to my left ankle, POP! I'm screaming even louder. Then he takes my left arm, POP!"

In agony, Udell hadn't received pain medication because the medical team hadn't determined the extent of his injuries. Doctors finally administered morphine and he slipped into a happy place.

Kristi Udell arrived in the hospital emergency room just as her husband began wailing in anguish. The doctor explained to her what was happening.

"When I saw him, he looked vaguely familiar," Kristi said, shuddering at the thought. "His face was puffed up to the size of a basketball, and he had a gash that went across his eye."

"How do I look?" he asked.

"Great," she lied.

He actually looked so beat up she was afraid to touch him for fear of hurting him more. In addition to his mangled face and broken and dislocated limbs, he had a gash across his chest and a cracked rib. The back of his right thigh also had been ripped open, leaving a nasty scar. Both arms had turned a grotesque black and blue, and various other scrapes, cuts and bruises maligned his body.

As bad as he looked though, Kristi felt relieved. Brian was alive.

During his first few hours in the hospital, the Udells found out White hadn't been so lucky. He'd been killed instantly from the violent force of the ejection.

"That was the most depressing time for me," Udell said, still choking up at the memory. "I'd held up pretty good until then. But when I found out Dennis was dead, I just lost it. He left behind a wife and two kids."

Doctors gave Udell additional morphine to help him sleep. Unfortunately, the drug caused him to dream.

"I dreamt someone jumped on my leg, and the thought made me jerk," he said, bringing his knee up in a reenactment.

"I reached up and touched my face for the first time. It felt like a dish of Playdough."



"I didn't realize it, but my left knee popped back out of socket." Because his leg was already in a cast, it wasn't until three days later when he transferred to a medical facility at Camp Lejeune, a Marine air station in North Carolina, that doctors found the knee dislocated once again.

"My kneecap was swollen to the size of a cantaloupe and laid over to the side kind of funny," Udell said. His tendons and ligaments had been torn apart, so nothing held his knee in place. It snapped out of joint three more times before they managed to cast it again.

After the swelling went down, two titanium rods had to be temporarily inserted into the knee to help hold it in place and keep it immobilized for about a month.

Four surgeries later and with six stainless steel screws in each leg, Udell began intensive physical therapy and his trek to walk and maybe even fly again. By his 32nd birthday, June 5, 1995, nearly two months after the accident, he took his first step.

"I didn't want to just lie around," Udell said. "I'd get in my wheelchair and wheel myself down to physical therapy every morning and work out for about an hour. Then I'd do the same thing in the afternoon. By the time I wheeled myself back to my hospital room that evening, I was exhausted and would go right to sleep."

For months, Udell increased his rehabilitation workouts until he was riding a bike, lifting weights, doing water exercises and other various muscle-building routines eight to ten hours a day. By the sixth month, he felt he was ready to fly again, something nobody had thought possible.

"Some people get depressed when going through the slow rehabilitation process," said Kriquette Alexander, senior program director for the Goldsboro, N.C., YMCA where Udell performed much of his rehab. "But Brian was an inspiration to everyone. He pushed himself and was very focused. He's a cool critter."

Even after so much progress, a skeptical medical board still had to be convinced that he was ready to fly again.

"They took me and a 'healthy' guy out to an airplane to demonstrate an emergency ground egress out of the aircraft," Udell said smugly. "We had to pretend the aircraft was on fire, unstrap, jump overboard and run 50 yards away. They timed us both. I beat the other guy by 10 seconds."

After going through a battery of tests and getting waivers for the screws he'd carry in his limbs for the rest of his life, Udell flew again for the first time in February '96, just 10 months after the crash.

On his second flight, he soared back over the same area where he crashed.

"I was just so excited to get back in the cockpit, I didn't have time to get scared," said Udell, whose father, retired Air Force Col. Maurice Udell, taught him to fly when he was 9. "I just love to fly. It's all I ever wanted to do."

Although Brian is back in the cockpit, he still has to go through stringent medical exams each year to stay on flying status. That's because the injuries to his limbs make him highly susceptible to degenerative arthritis.

But for Udell, who had graduated at the top of his undergraduate pilot training class and had a strong resume package into the Thunder-birds before the crash, flying is no longer number one in his life. His first son was born while he labored through rehab. Their second son came just a few months ago. Kristi's strength, along with Morgan, 18 months old, and Garrett, 3 months, and the eye-opening effect of the accident, have changed his priorities.

"When I clung onto that raft for dear life, I wasn't thinking about flying again or drinking beer with my buddies," he said. "I prayed to God that he would let me see my wife again and be there when my child was born."

In the hospital room during his first son's birth, Morgan's head just made its way out into the world when he opened his eyes and looked up at his dad for the first time. Udell's eyes welled up.

His prayer was answered.

