

“The Rest of the Story!” (A “gripping tale.” As promised in Issue 10’s SYC Department.)

Stake Your Claim: Closest to the Ground Loop Recovery=Five Feet!

By Ron Catton (USAF Thunderbird Solo 1962-1964)

When Bob Hoover talks, Hun pilots listen. Ralph Brooks (Right Wing) and I (Opposing Solo) were no exceptions at the Reno Air Races in 1962 as the three of us were re-hydrating over beers at the end of a busy air demonstration day. Bob was talking about the Hun’s tendency to mush big time if pressed too hard in a dive recovery. We all know the feeling.

At one point, Bob asked Ralph a pointed question, “Ralph, assuming you’re in a steep dive and too low to bail out, what would you do?” Ralph, a former FWS Instructor and one of the best sticks around, recited the routine: “Afterburner in, stick back to the edge of the high-speed buzz, pump the nose up to the horizon with rudders and hang on!” Bob then asked what I would do. I couldn’t think of anything to add and said so. Bob smiled and said he agreed with us both except for one more thing. Ralph and I were both all ears.

The “one more thing” went like this: “At just the right moment before crashing, JAM THE STICK FULL FORWARD.” He explained that the angle of attack should immediately come off the mushing Hun, thus allowing it to more or less “bounce” off the compressed ground effect, “he thought.” Bob smiled as Ralph and I mulled this one over.

Who wants to die with the stick full forward, I wondered? Wouldn’t it look like suicide or something?

Just a few weeks later, we were doing an air show at Pampa, Texas. For you east coast Hun pilots, it’s about 40 miles ESE of Amarillo, Texas. Why Pampa? Well, John Tower was from Texas and the Chairman of the House Armed Services Committee. Whatever John wanted, John got, right? Since Pampa had a very short runway, we staged out of Amarillo.

For the record, I think the “Double Solo” job is the best of all fighter pilot worlds. You get to do the “show-off” solo tricks, plus looping and rolling with the diamond formation for dessert. It’s also true that each position has its own set of challenges. For the double solo pilot in my day, timing was the big one. When doing head-on maneuvers at closure speeds of approximately three football fields per second, a second or two early or late to show center could easily ruin the crowd’s excitement factor big time. But I digress, so back to Pampa.

The day was clear and the air show seemed to be going pretty well, when all of a sudden I found myself at least 10 seconds early for the opposing loop maneuver (think three football fields per second). “Bobbie (Bob Moore, the other solo), I’m early for the loop,” I reported. “How early?” he asked. “Very early,” I confessed while popping the boards and coming to idle. Well, Bobbie went burner, and I slowed well below 350 knots. We made show center reasonably well, and our crossing at the top looked okay from the ground.

But I was very slow on top and well below the altitude normally needed to recover from a loop off the deck.

Diving down the backside and looking out the top of my canopy, I saw that Bobbie was almost fully recovered, but I was still heading straight down. I was going to die! Remembering what Hoover had said at Reno, I started the drill: Afterburner in, stick back to the buzz, rudder the nose up to the horizon, but all the while still mushing big time. As the ground rushed upward in my peripheral vision, I remember wondering, just when is the right moment to jam the stick forward? Then I decided it was NOW! But I couldn’t do it, at least not one-handed. I just couldn’t intentionally jam the stick full forward—it totally conflicted with anything I’d ever done before. However, that was the luckiest moment of my life, because I then closed my eyes and jammed the stick full forward with BOTH hands. WOOMPFF, and it worked! (I wouldn’t be here to report, had I the courage to do it the first time I had thought NOW.)

Now, with both eyes open, I was cruising THROUGH, not over, a field of Texas corn (maize to you east coasters). Fortunately, the ground sloped away, and I flew out into the open. The next maneuver was our six-ship roll. The good news is that I managed the join-up of a lifetime just as our flight leader, Hoot Gibson, was calling “nose up and rolling.” However, in all the excitement, I did forget to flip on my smoke. We finished the show with the diamond’s signature Bomb Burst and Bobbie’s vertical rolls through the center. The flight back to Amarillo was routine—the parking wasn’t.

You’ve seen the drill: Taxi in close trail, then Lead turns in, Two turns in, Three turns in, and so forth. As I turned in, my crew chief, John Gill, was going through the normal signals, but then he stopped, did an about face, and began walking away while waving goodbye! What the hell was going on? After kick-stepping down the side, I saw what John saw: corn stalks hanging out of the intake and the bright green belly of my otherwise beautiful Hun.

Some time later at a Thunderbird Reunion, Neil Eddins and Bob Hoover were listening patiently, while I gave Neil a gushing rendition of Bob’s miracle dive recovery technique and how it had saved my life. When I finished, Hoover turned to me with a perfect poker face and said, “Gee Ron, I was just kidding!”

So there you have it: When Bob Hoover talks, Hun pilots do listen—even if he’s “just kidding.”

P.S. The story you’ve just read is mostly true—just like most of our fighter pilot stories, right? At age 76 now, some details do get a little hazy, except wherever I’m the hero.

Stay well — Ron Catton. ■

Thanks for an intimate look inside the world of Aviation Giants that most of us can only imagine. Ed