

Taking to the Silk – TWICE

Lt Melvin V Corley survived two bale-outs, once from an F-51 over Korea and later from an F-104. Warren E Thompson describes his lucky breaks





BALING OUT or ejecting from an aircraft is not an uncommon experience. Countless pilots have faced a situation where their aircraft was not able to make it back to an airfield, either because of a mechanical problem or combat damage. However, this exclusive fraternity dwindles considerably when a pilot has had to do it twice!

Lt Melvin Corley poses by his F-51 after flying his 100th mission on September 3, 1951.
MEL CORLEY

An F-104 over Luke, Arizona, in July 1971. MIKE KORTE



F-51s at Chinhae (K-10) some time in 1951. ROY BELL

Lt Melvin V Corley escaped from a North American F-51 Mustang cockpit which became engulfed in flames after taking numerous hits from ground fire over North Korea. Less than ten years later, flying in a Lockheed F-104 Starfighter, he had most of his cockpit sheered off in a mid-air collision with a Lockheed T-33.



The Mustang's accomplishments in Korea are legendary, but due to the aircraft's low-level work and its vulnerability, a very large number were shot down. Many of the pilots were never recovered because they were operating deep into North Korea.

On the day that Melvin first went down, July 9, 1951, he had already flown three missions. That afternoon, he was in Squadron 'Ops' when word came that they needed a rapid response mission immediately. With his Mustang in for maintenance, he volunteered to use one of the squadron 'spares' and to fly with the main flight in case someone had mechanical problems and had to return to base.

Melvin recalled: "After we had flown about 50 miles beyond the bomb line, the Group Commander radioed us to release the 'spare' Mustang and return to base. So I peeled away from the flight and since I had two 500lb bombs, four 5in rockets and a full load of 0.50 calibre ammo, I started looking for some targets of opportunity.

FLAK TRAP

"In a few minutes, I flew over a small village where, near a bridge, I saw six Chinese military trucks. My first two passes used my bombs and one of them hit the bridge. Next, I made my rocket attacks against the trucks.

A war-weary Mustang taxis out with ordnance for a mission over North Korea. The 12th Squadron pilot watching from the side wears his old A-2 leather jacket from World War Two. USAF

A 12th Squadron Mustang is rearmed and refuelled while the pilot stays in the cockpit at Seoul City Airport in 1950.

ED NEBINGER

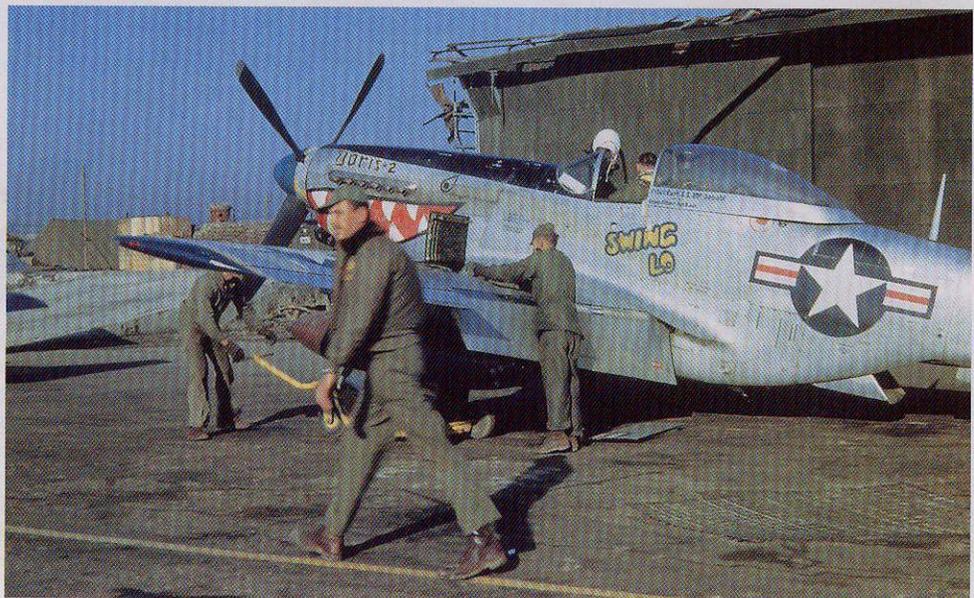
"None of the flak came too close and the trucks did not move... They were dummies! I had been suckered into a flak trap."

While all of this was going on, I was being shot at by 0.50 calibre, 20mm and 40mm guns. None of the flak came too close and the trucks did not move... They were dummies!

"I had been suckered into a flak trap. After my last strafing pass, I pulled out and leveled off at 6,000ft and turned toward home. I was about to give Control a radio call

to alert them of my return so they wouldn't call out the guns on me.

"At that moment, my Mustang took a monstrous 40mm hit in the right wing root, snap-rolling out of control while the cockpit filled with dense smoke. I pulled the canopy release and it came off clean, but this caused the cockpit to become a fiery inferno.



"I tried to stand up to get out, but the aircraft was snap-rolling so badly I couldn't kick away. Another effort to stand up resulted in my being violently thrown back into the fire and then, just as violently, I was tossed out of the cockpit and on the way out, I slammed into the Mustang's tail."

Melvin was knocked unconscious for a few seconds. As he came to, he pulled the parachute's D-ring. He swung twice, then hit the ground hard. He was at a very low altitude and was lucky to have regained consciousness when he did. Landing on his back, he was unable to move for several minutes.

GET ME OUT OF HERE!

When he rolled over on his side, he found he was staring at an elderly Korean man standing in the doorway of his house. The old man was scared and did not attempt to hide.

It didn't take long for Melvin to realise he was badly hurt – left shoulder broken, several ribs caved in and right leg almost unusable. As he got out of his 'chute harness, he motioned the old man to come

A few minutes later, they heard the sound of a helicopter coming in so Melvin fired another smoke signal. The chopper set down on the dyke they were hiding behind. Two crewmen jumped out to help and Melvin indicated he wanted to take the old man who had aided him, but the pilot said no. They took off through a hail of small arms fire and as luck would have it, Melvin got hit, but not seriously. He didn't

going on and on and went right past the end of the runway, hit something and nosed over with the tail pointed straight up to the sky!

"I was hanging from my seat belt, thinking: 'With all I have been through, I am going to die in the back of an old 'Gooney Bird'!' After three weeks of recuperation, I was sent to Japan for an Escape and Evasion debriefing. Anyone who had successfully evaded capture behind



A couple of Mustangs give a demo for enlisted troops at Hoengsong (K-46). This napalm drop engulfed a large portion of the small, uninhabited island close to the base. USAF

The two-seat training version, though limited in production numbers, was plentiful at the F-104's main training base at Luke. MIKE KORTE



enemy lines had to be debriefed to see if anything useful could be passed on to other crews."

In Tokyo, Melvin had a chance meeting with a young lieutenant who asked about his injuries. After telling his story, there was a funny look on the Lieutenant's face. He asked for the date of the incident – it turned out that he was the radar rescue controller on the scope that day and had diverted the SA-16 to investigate.

He stated that he was following

over and after turning him around, was able to get him to carry him piggy-back. He could only carry the heavier pilot for short distances at a time without resting.

A short time later, they looked up and saw a Grumman SA-16 Albatross rescue aircraft circling so Melvin fired one of his flares. It couldn't land but the pilot rocked his wings to let them know he had them in sight before turning and exiting the area.

Thirty minutes later, a small group of Chinese soldiers started shooting at them, but they were slightly out of range. As they moved closer, Melvin pulled his 0.45 and fired a few rounds to let them know he was armed. Both men eased in behind a rice paddy dyke to stay out of view.

"They took off through a hail of small arms fire and as luck would have it, Melvin got hit..."

wake up until the next morning in the hospital.

RELATIVE SAFETY

Two days later, Melvin was on a Douglas C-47 Skytrain on his way back to his unit. He figured he was safe now as the old 'Gooney Bird' taxied out, but that wasn't quite the end of the adventure.

"Our home base destination was 'mucked in' by strong winds and bad weather. The C-47 pilot landed too long... going too fast... on a very wet and slippery runway. We kept

one 'blip' that suddenly became two. Actually, it was Melvin's Mustang, and the second 'blip' was his starboard wing being blown off by the 40mm as it separated from the aircraft! Needless to say, anything the young radar controller wanted, Melvin bought for him because his action had probably saved him from a grim situation as a PoW or worse!

FAST FORWARD

Fast forward about eight years. Now Major Corley, Melvin had moved into jets and his expertise



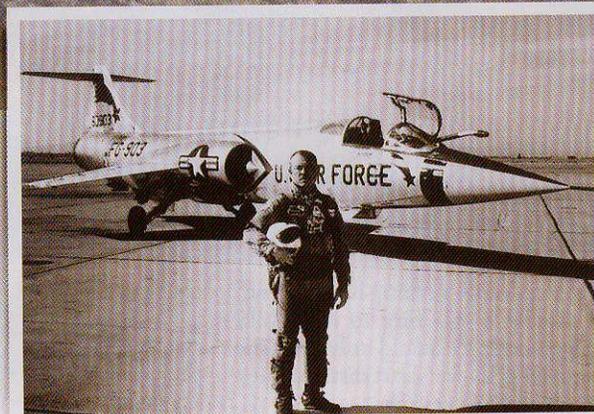
“Just as my ‘chute deployed, the engine of the T-33 came right by me... It was so close that it is difficult to describe.”

had put him in the cockpit of Lockheed’s ‘Manned Missile’ – the F-104 Starfighter. After his tour in Korea, he flew the Lockheed F-80C Shooting Star and various models of the North American F-86 Sabre and F-100 Super Sabre.

On November 12, 1959, he was one of the 476th Fighter Squadron pilots involved in deploying their F-104s over to Moron, Spain, via Tinker Air Force Base, Oklahoma, and Myrtle Beach, South Carolina. The plan was to hit the tanker over west Texas, but the weather was so bad that they were ordered to land at Tinker and refuel. This was accomplished and as the fighters pulled out to the end of the runway, they were told to hold for an aircraft on final.

Melvin picks up the story from that point: “The tower stated that the aircraft was a missed approach, so I told him that I would continue to hold. The T-33 made a low approach and I saw the hood up in the back and the front-seat pilot really giving us the once-over.

“We got the OK and launched our flight. My wingman was Lt Dave Perry, and as we climbed for altitude, he dropped back slightly and then broke left. An instant later, there was a big bang and my cockpit immediately filled up with smoke and fire, leaving me no control over the aircraft! I was forced to the left side of the cockpit, at which time I pulled the ejection seat ring between my legs.”



The Major’s Starfighter was equipped with an ejection seat that sent the pilot straight down through the bottom of the aircraft. As he exited, his elbow hit the cockpit console but other than that, everything worked just as it was supposed to.

“Just as my ‘chute deployed, the engine of the T-33 came right by me, burning my jacket, and part of my face and g-suit. It was so close that it is difficult to describe. A split second after the engine passed me, I was looking around and there was a

TOP: Due to the small size of the airframe and the powerful engine, the F-104 had relatively short ‘legs’, but they were extended by aerial refuelling. Here Starfighters over Spain take on fuel from a Boeing KB-50. RAY PAMPLIN

ABOVE: Major Melvin Corley in front of an F-104C. MEL CORLEY

[North American] B-45 [Tornado] heading straight for me and the pilot had to do a maximum turn to avoid flying through me.”

MIRACLE ESCAPE

The closest pilot to Melvin was his wingman, Lt Perry. His recollection of the collision is probably the most vivid. He describes what he witnessed in the split second the mid-air happened:

“As we climbed out of Tinker, making a left turnout, I had to cross over to the left wing to allow No.3 and No.4 to join on the right. I was fairly close to Major Corley when I picked up the T-33 in my peripheral and recall seeing the front-seater looking at Mel and that the back-seater did not have his hood over him.

“I did not have time to do anything but jam the stick into the northwest corner of the cockpit, and at that moment I felt a tremendous explosion and as my aircraft completed the roll, I looked back right and saw Lead’s aircraft completely engulfed in flames. There was no cockpit on it!”

The next thing was the sound of No.3 calling for a sharp right break to avoid the debris. Lt Perry scanned the area for ’chutes and saw only one but kept orbiting in hopes of seeing a second. At that time, he was told to recover back at Tinker after he had burned off some of his fuel.

It was Perry’s perception that the T-33 was trying to buzz his element and had misjudged the F-104’s rapid acceleration. He says he will never

forget that micro-second before the T-33 and F-104 collided.

Melvin continued: “As I floated down, I noticed some Starfighters in the immediate vicinity, but they did not see me wave or give them the thumbs-up. Glancing down, all I saw below me, and coming up fast, were oak trees. A second later, I crossed my legs, threw my arms up over my face and hit the trees.

“I came to, looking up and hanging by my straps in a tree. For a brief moment, I was worried about how to get down, but when I looked downwards, I was only about ten inches from the ground.

“After quickly releasing my ’chute and getting on firm ground, I lit up a cigarette and at that time I felt something warm in my left glove and found it full of blood. I had a bad slash in my elbow, but this didn’t stop me from rolling up my parachute and

heading for a farmhouse that I had seen on the way down.”

It didn’t take long for Melvin to meet the farmer and his son. He explained that he needed to make a call to the base. Minutes later, as they were walking to the house, a staff car pulled up with the Base Commander behind the wheel. Needless to say, he was shook up because a mid-air had happened at his base.

After Melvin assured him he was OK, they got back in the car and the commander promptly ran into a ditch because he was so upset. No one was hurt and they proceeded to base.

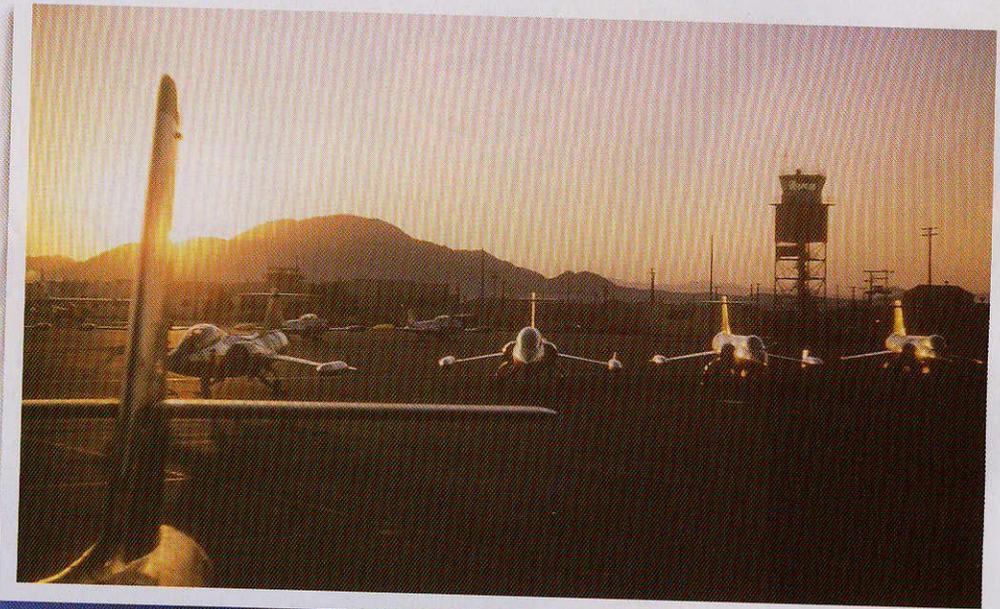
The conclusion to this story has two parts. The good part is that Major Corley survived the collision with only a few scratches and cuts. The sad part concerns the T-33 and its crew. Both were based at Vance Air Force Base, Oklahoma.

The 479th Tactical Fighter Wing, based at George AFB, was one of the major users of the F-104. This shot was taken in August 1961 - T-33As are in the background.

ROBERT TUCK

Close-up cockpit view shows how small the fuselage was on the F-104 when compared with the size of the average pilot.

MIKE KORTE



The cadet in it did not have his D-ring fastened to his ’chute, so it would not act automatically. He separated from his seat and was too low for the parachute to open. He didn’t make it, but his instructor did.

It was determined that the pilot in the front seat saw the Starfighters waiting to launch and as he went around, he built up a lot of airspeed and made a pass on one of the elements. Unfortunately, he never saw Major Corley or Lt Perry.

He was charged with 90% pilot error and Melvin was given 10% for having a weak radio receiver. It was a tragic accident, but it could have been far worse.

The Major stated that of all the aircraft he flew in his career, the F-104 was the greatest fighter ever built and his favourite to fly.