

Old George

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George Air Force Base simmers in the midst of the sunbaked Mojave Desert about one hundred miles east of Los Angeles, California. Because this base has ideal flying conditions, it is the most active of the Tactical Air Command Bases.

Being an airman on this base, my favorite diversion is to gain altitude, usually by climbing on an aircraft, and to watch the many activities of the base. Today I am straddling the fuselage of a parked F-86. The sun is directly overhead, eliminating shadows and glinting off the smooth surface of a myriad of aircraft. The seemingly interminable strip of north-south runway stretches before me. One mile to the south, this runway crosses perpendicularly another almost invisible concrete strip. Off to my right is the endless expanse of reddish-yellow sand, studded with cactus and tumbleweed. On my far left are the maintenance hangars with their black roofs and dull brown walls soaking up the sun. In front of the hangars lies the broad concrete parking ramp. Aircraft are parked on the ramp in dozens of neat military rows. Each row has a particular pattern of bright reflections.

About a hundred feet in front of me, two F-100 fighters are preparing to take off down the north-south runway. They are facing away from me and I can see roaring flame in their tailpipes. As they start their take off roll, the horizontal heat waves from their exhaust blend with the vertical heat waves wafting up from the runway, to form a shimmering screen that distorts the fighters into a half-fantasy, half-fact illusion. As the planes clear the ground and rise above the shimmering screen, they appear as silver flames against the distant mountains, and later, as they climb into the blue, they appear as graceful falcons trailing cottony plumes through the sky.

As the fighters fade into the clouds, an F-102 being readied for ground testing on the other side of the runway catches my eye. The heat screen distorts my vision, and the one-o—two appears to be a deadly iron dart with its triangular fin, delta wings, and needle nose poised for action. Airmen are tugging the air and electrical lines from the squatty auxiliary power units and connecting them to the big bird. I can see the number 510 on the tail, along with a flying red wedge in a white background — the insignia of the 329th Fighter Interceptor Squadron. As they scurry about, the airmen look like Lilliputians tying down Gulliver. Everyone is now standing still. Suddenly a shaft of reddish flame and black smoke shoots from the belly of the plane. The starting turbine has lit off. Heat waves drift up from the tailpipe. The engine gathers speed and hot exhaust gas pours from the tailpipe. The hot gases catch a

parts pan and send it spinning across the desert. It flashes its surprise until it hits a cactus. Now the chief mechanic raises his right arm straight up and moves it around in a fast circular motion to signal for full power. Flame gushes from the tailpipe; the plane struggles at its anchor and rises upward on its oleo struts. On my left, a train of squatty yellow power units is inching past the fire station at the uniform rate of five miles per hour. The power units jerk to a halt as an elephant-like line of fire trucks comes lumbering out of the fire station. The trucks seem to have been rudely awakened; their engines are sputtering; their sirens are wailing; their single red eyes are flashing. But despite all the commotion they are making, they seem to be moving very slowly. Finally, they evenly space themselves along the length of the east-west runway. Now I see the cause of their consternation; a plane is in the landing pattern with only one wheel down. As the pilot makes a low pass over the runway, I notice that the plane is one of the fighters I had watched take off. As it comes in on a low pass, it reminds me of a crippled duck cautiously trying to land near a duck blind in the middle of the hunting season, without being shot. While the fighter climbs back into the pattern, the stuck wheel slowly comes down, and on the next pass the plane eases in for a near perfect landing.

Somewhere in the distance a bell is ringing. As I sit here on the F-86, wondering why the bell is ringing, an officer and three sergeants come charging directly toward me.

All of a sudden I realize what is happening. The ringing bell signifies the start of an alert. The pilot and the sergeants are scrambling. And I am sitting on an aircraft that is going to be airborne in three minutes. Now it is my turn to scramble.

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I wrote this little story when I was a fourth class Cadet at the USAF Academy in order to pass my English 101 class in 1960.