

SUPERSONIC ESCAPE POD

How to protect fliers forced to bail out at Mach 2? How could a pilot possibly survive the high-speed windblast, subzero temperatures and deadly low air pressure? For Convair, the answer was this fully encapsulated escape pod developed by Stanley Aviation for the B-58 Hustler supersonic bomber. It featured clamshell doors that closed before the seat was pressurized and then blasted out of the cockpit. Designed to float if it landed in water, the seat was even equipped with survival gear.

To test the capsule during supersonic flight without endangering human pilots, Convair used a bear weighing roughly the same as a human flier. On March 21, 1962, a female black bear named Yogi was mildly sedated, outfitted with biometric measuring gear and strapped into the B-58A escape capsule. After being ejected from the Hustler at 870 mph and 35,000 feet, Yogi was just fine when technicians recovered the capsule. A male bear named Big John later survived ejection at 45,000 feet and more than 1,000 mph. The parachute trip to the ground was doubtless more bear-able thanks to the fully enclosed, pressurized pod.

U.S. Air Force Captains Thomas Hogg, James McElvain and Richard Nauman were among the Hustler crewmen who would owe their lives to Stanley encapsulated seats. On April 3, 1969, they punched out over Nebraska after their B-58A of the 305th Bomb Wing suffered a systems failure at altitude.

Nan Siegel

LOADED FOR BEAR

Stanley Aviation's B-58A escape capsule (right) was tested with the help of a bear named Yogi (inset).



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INSET: HISTORNET ARCHIVES