

The F-16 pilot was headed straight  
for the crowd. He had to make a  
**life-or-death decision in**



# 22 SECONDS

**BY GREGORY  
FREEMAN**

**Pointed nose-down** and hurtling toward the ground at 8,400 feet per minute, F-16C fighter jet pilot Chris Stricklin came to a terrible realization: I'm not going to make it.

The next decision he made would send him on the ride of his life—a tall order for an Air Force Thunderbird pilot whose typical day included heart-stopping maneuvers and high-speed dives with little room for error. Now one of those moves had gone terribly wrong. And Stricklin had to choose—

instantly—between two lousy options: risk his life by staying with the plane or risk his life by ejecting.

Though ejection seats have saved hundreds of pilots, they're not exactly the easy way out of a crashing plane. Pulling that handle starts a reaction so violent and dangerous that pilots do it only when they are certain the alternative is much worse. For Stricklin, the moment had arrived.

That day at a 2003 airshow at Mountain Home Air Force Base in Idaho,

the 31-year-old Air Force captain from Shelby, Alabama, was Thunderbird 6, the show opener. He planned a stunning solo maneuver: Taking off at high speed, he would initiate a sharp climb, roll the plane upside down, and complete the loop by diving and pulling up at the last moment. Then the rest of the Thunderbird jets were supposed to scream in for more stunts.

Seconds passed. Now Stricklin reached for the eject handle.

*No, not yet. Got to steer away more.*

There was a runway just below, Stricklin knew. He reached again.

*No, not yet. This sink rate will kill me. I've got to get the sink rate under control first.*

The sink rate is, in essence, how fast the plane and the ground are rushing



By the time he reached for the ejector, Stricklin was operating purely on instinct.

But now Stricklin realized he had badly miscalculated. He was roaring toward the earth at a speed that he knew was so high he could never pull up in time. His training and instincts kicked in. There was no time to study the situation. Things just happened.

"I was thinking, I'm going to have to eject, but throughout my entire time flying in airshows, the safety of the crowd was always on my mind. I said to myself, I can't eject yet."

Gregory Freeman is the author of *Sailors to the End: The Deadly Fire on the USS Forrester and the Heroes Who Fought It*, published by William Morrow.

toward each other. Despite the rockets that shoot the pilot's butt out of the plane, no ejection seat can overcome a sink rate as high as Stricklin was experiencing. Again, he didn't need instruments to know this. He just felt it. So Stricklin stayed with the plane a little longer.

And the ground kept coming.

*If I'm not going to survive this anyway, I might as well keep pulling and see if I can get farther around the loop, farther from the crowd.*

Pulling up hard, Stricklin was trying to get the plane into a position in which he just might survive an ejection.

tion and still spare the crowd below. The Thunderbird pilot knew that the No. 1 cause of unsuccessful ejections is hesitation: The flier doesn't punch out when he should because he is afraid of injury, reluctant to give up the effort to save the multimillion-dollar plane, or too concerned about people on the ground. At that moment, Stricklin also knew that if he bailed too soon,

ond. There wasn't time to be scared.

His third reach was all instinct. "My body just said, Now is the time."

From the instant a pilot pulls that handle to the point where he can look up and see a parachute over his head is normally about 1.5 seconds. So much happens in that moment—and he'll smile at the sight of his open chute only if everything goes precisely right.



The pilot's prayer: that no limb hits the side of the plane as the seat blows away.

he might die. And if he waited too long, he definitely would die.

His window of opportunity was about half a second.

"Anything before that, and the seat wouldn't have overcome the forces working against it, and anything after that, I would have gone too deep into the fireball after the crash. I wouldn't have made it."

Stricklin's entire flight that day, from wheels up to wheels—and everything else—back on the ground, lasted just 22 seconds. From the time he realized he had to eject to the point he finally pulled the handle was less than a sec-

Stricklin was starting off in the hole, in what ejection-seat experts dispassionately call an "out-of-envelope situation with low survivability." His plane was still falling fast, even after he managed to decrease the sink rate. And he was low. Very low.

When Stricklin pulled the handle, his plane was 140 feet off the ground, flying mostly level at 260 mph. In milliseconds, the plane fell another 100 feet before Stricklin actually left it. The F-16 was on the ground and in flames just 0.8 seconds after he was ejected from the aircraft.

Pulling the handle fired initiation

cartridges that sent gas spewing through a system of tubing in the seat. In turn, that released a high-tension spring, tightening the harness and leg straps, yanking the flier into position.

At the moment the ejection seat whipped Stricklin into that optimum position, it created an exit for him, blowing the canopy off the jet fighter. Then a catapult system thrust the seat

Stricklin was pulling between 10 and 15 times the force of gravity, making him feel like he weighed nearly a ton. It all happened too fast for him to feel the effect of the G forces—the whole rocket ride lasted about 0.17 seconds.

One reason he didn't feel it: His body was moving up so quickly that it was leaving all his blood behind, forcing it down into his lower extremities



Like a giant shotgun, in less than a second the ejector blasted Stricklin skyward.

up about 40 inches on a set of rails, ripping away the connections to the cockpit and activating an oxygen supply contained in the seat.

As the seat rode to the top of the rails, a port opened and gas ignited the rocket, blasting Stricklin fully out of the cockpit like a Roman candle. Only about 0.1 seconds had passed since he pulled the handle.

During all this, the forces on the body are so horrendous that training can't include a real ejection; pilots go through a simulated exercise at only a fraction of the power used in the catapult and rocket. Small wonder:

and starving his brain of the blood needed to stay conscious. Stricklin did not black out, but some pilots do. The rest of his body was having a rough ride as well. Everything squishy was being squished—fluids of all types, soft tissues, organs. It all moves down, because it just can't keep up with the ejection seat.

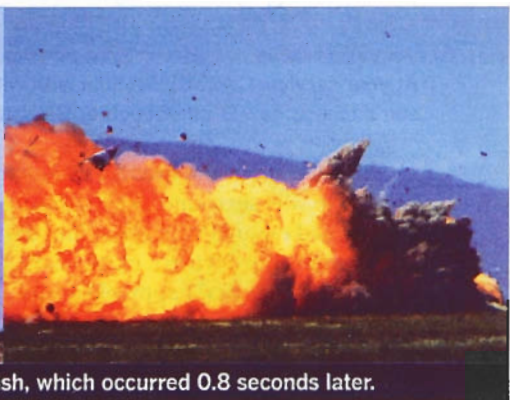
As soon as the rocket was spent, Stricklin's ejection system calculated the conditions and determined that this was a low-altitude, low-speed ejection. So it activated a rocket under the rear of the seat that is attached to a gyroscopic stabilizing system. This

additional thrust was important for Stricklin, because he had left the plane only 40 feet off the ground. The burst gave him a 100-foot cushion.

At 0.2 seconds after initiation, the seat deployed the main parachute. Stricklin didn't have time to wince from the shock of it opening. Because there's only room in the cockpit for a small parachute, a pilot descends fast

*That's not good. I'm standing up. I'm not supposed to land standing up. I'm supposed to roll. My chute didn't open. And you don't land standing up. So I guess I didn't make it. This must be what it's like to be dead.*

Slowly Stricklin realized he was alive. His first thought was to look toward the crowd and make sure he hadn't hit anyone.



The seat popped Stricklin clear of the crash, which occurred 0.8 seconds later.

and pretty much straight down, with very little ability to steer or soften the landing.

"It's not like the X Games, where you see people swoop in and walk out from under their parachutes," says Lt. Comdr. Becky Bates, an ejection expert who trains Navy and Marine pilots. "The landing is a real shocker."

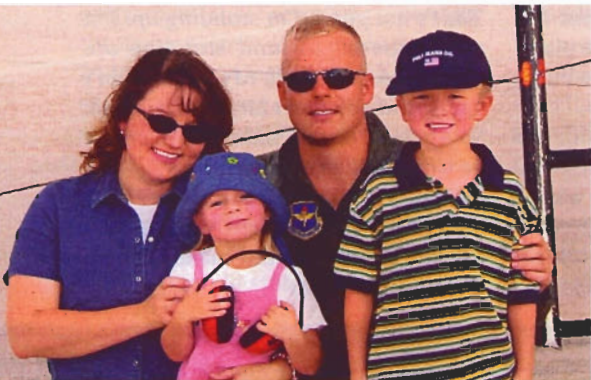
Stricklin came down in the flaming trail left by the F-16 as it tumbled across the airfield. In shock and not yet realizing he was on the ground, he first looked up to see if his parachute had deployed. He didn't see his chute.

*Well, my parachute didn't open.*

*They're okay. They're not that far away, so I guess the easiest thing is if I just walk over there. But first, where is my plane?*

He knew he should steer clear of the wreckage; no sense surviving an eject and then walking into the blazing ruins. But as he looked around, he couldn't see the plane, the flames or the huge black smoke clouds billowing around him.

In fact, Stricklin was dangerously close to the remains of his F-16. He wasn't burned because the survival kit attached to him by a long cord hit the ground first, throwing up a dust



**At your service, Captain: Stricklin with wife Terri, son Zachary, now 9, and daughter Bethany, now 7.**

cloud that put out the fire in a 10-foot circle. He was surrounded by flames. And he had enough wits about him to know something wasn't right. "So I just lay down in that happy place and waited," he says.

Stricklin didn't regain his senses until he had been in the hospital for 45 minutes. Then the reality of what had happened hit so hard that nurses came running to see why his monitors had spiked and set off alarms.

The most serious injuries were to Stricklin's back, which took months to heal. And one side effect of taking the ride of his life wasn't apparent to anyone until his wife made it to the hospital two days after the accident. He stood up and hugged her, then pulled back, puzzled. Something was wrong.

"We've been married for 10 years, and she wasn't the same height she usually was," Stricklin says.

Actually it was Stricklin who had

lost two inches, from the compression of his spine during the ejection. The height is slowly returning, and he is now within a half-inch of his normal 5 feet, 10 inches. "I've heard that the Air Force will let you eject only a certain number of times because of how hard it is on you," says Stricklin. "They wouldn't have to tell me, because if anything like that happened again, I'd say, 'Dudes, I'm done.' I'm thankful for the seat and all the

fine training that saved my life, but it was the kind of amazing experience you don't want to have again."

Stricklin and his wife, Terri, recently returned from China with their new baby daughter, Aubree Lu, 22 months. The captain plans to return to flying fighter planes soon.

### **Want to feel like a fighter pilot for an hour?**

Get inside the cockpit of an F-15 in *Fighter Pilot: Operation Red Flag*, now showing in IMAX theaters around the country. The movie stars U.S. Air Force Capt. John Stratton, who is the grandson of a World War II flying ace, and has flown his F-15 Eagle in combat tours throughout Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia and Iraq.

