

“GARY, YOU BETTER GET BACK IN THAT THING!”

SOME 55 YEARS AFTER IT HAPPENED, THE FACT THAT A PILOTLESS CONVAIR F-106 INTERCEPTOR MANAGED TO LAND ITSELF IS AN EVENT THAT STILL PROMPTS DISCUSSION

BY HOWARD CARTER



On 2 February 1970, 1st Lt. Gary Foust was undertaking a flight in F-106A-100-CO USAF 58-0787, the last of the great American interceptor aircraft — the mighty Convair Delta Dart. The F-106 was a development of the earlier F-102 Delta Dagger and was part of a 1954 program to create what the USAF viewed as the “ultimate interceptor” — a massively high-performance aircraft with only one mission in its life and that mission was to kill Soviet long-range bombers.

Originally designated as the F-102B, the new warplane had some major differences including installation of the Pratt & Whitney J75 turbojet engine that was fed by



Insignia of the 71st Fighter Interceptor Squadron.

heavily redesigned air inlets. Along with a variable-geometry inlet duct to suit a wide range of supersonic speeds, application of area rule to the fuselage to make breaking the sound barrier an easy task was incorporated along with the latest avionics, and a general

overall increase in size, made the F-102B was pretty much a completely different aircraft when compared to its earlier namesake. Designed without a gun nor any sort of provision for carrying bombs, the new interceptor would be armed with AIM-4 Falcon air-to-air missiles carried within an internal weapons bay. This clean configuration was beneficial to long-distance supersonic cruising as the exterior would not be marred by drag-inducing weapons pylons.

However, the Convair F-102A was not turning out to be the warplane the USAF wanted since early variants had very poor performance — limited to lower altitudes and subsonic speeds. Since the USAF was placing a great

deal of hope on the F-102 and its ability to counter the Soviet bomber threat, Convair and the USAF went into overdrive into an attempt to save the plane. The first YF-102 got airborne on 23 October 1953 but was destroyed in a crash just nine days later. A second YF-102 was flying three months after the accident but initial flight test data was disappointing. Although the F-102 looked fast, it could not achieve planned supersonic flight.

This led to a redesign of the fuselage with a pinched center section called area rule that allowed the plane to easily surpass the sound barrier. Revolutionary at the time, area rule was also called “coke bottle” since, when viewed from above, it resembled the glass bottle that carried the popular beverage. A new thinner and wider wing was created while

the Westinghouse J40 turbojet was dumped. This engine was installed in prototypes and pre-production aircraft when there were delays with the Curtiss-Wright J67 and the MA-1 Fire Control System. Failure of the J40 led to the installation of the P&W J57 turbojet with afterburner. This major design would be the only thing that would save the aircraft along with the careers of a number of politicians and high-ranking USAF officers. Fortunately, all the work paid off and the new YF-102A got airborne on 20 December 1954 — just 118 days after the redesign program started. The first production F-102A flew on 24 June

1955 and massive contracts were issued for the type, which could now attain over Mach 1 at the required altitudes. Throughout its life, the F-102A was subjected to some major airframe and avionics upgrades and this allowed it to stay in service longer than originally planned. However, there was a need for greater performance since the Soviets were reportedly



Reflections bouncing off the canopy of an accompanying F-106B two-seater, F-106A 58-0775 of the 71st FIS was photographed as it waited its turn to top off fuel tanks from a KC-135.