

MACH 1.05 EJECTION

AS A NEW GENERATION OF SUPERSONIC WARPLANES ENTERED THE USAF INVENTORY, SOME THOUGHT PILOTS WOULD NOT BE ABLE TO SURVIVE AN EJECTION PAST THE SPEED OF MACH 1. GEORGE SMITH WOULD PROVE THEM WRONG

BY HOWARD CARTER

For George Franklin Smith, it did not seem that life could get much better. Dawn on 26 February 1955 was perfect — a cool breeze was coming off the Pacific and a blue sky hung over his apartment at Manhattan Beach in southern California. George was 31-years-old and had what he considered the world's best job — Inspection Test Pilot for the North American F-100 Super Sabre, the world's first production fighter capable of traveling at over Mach 1 in level flight. The "100" was a bit of a beast and North American engineers were working out problems that beset the early variants but that Saturday morning saw George leaving his apartment with a smile on his face and the whole world in front of him.

He was going to get a few "practical"

things done such as heading to the laundromat and then perhaps having lunch at one of his favorite spots on the beach. As he got in his car and began to do the rounds, he suddenly felt a pull towards his NAA office at Los Angeles International Airport — just a few minutes away from his apartment. The previous day, Smith had done a late afternoon test flight on an F-100. He had started writing his report on the flight but did not complete it so, he figured, why not take a few minutes out of his Saturday morning to complete the report so he would not have to do it on Monday?

After all, there were few things better than "going to the airport." Smith had always been fascinated by flying and during the Second World War he

joined the US Navy and won his wings of gold at NAS Pensacola. He would fly Grumman TBF-3 Avenger torpedo-bombers and went into combat with VT-10 aboard USS *Intrepid* (CV-11) flying missions against Japanese forces in Korea along with attacks on the Home Islands (today, a large George F. Smith scrapbook

loaded with photos, charts, and maps is preserved in the archives at the *Intrepid* Sea, Air & Space Museum).

With the end of that conflict, he wanted to keep flying but did not particularly wish to continue with regimented military life or the schedule of an airline pilot. He began making his living as a ferry pilot and quickly built-up time in several dozen types of aircraft. When a slot opened up at North American, he applied



Famed test pilot George Welch would die in the crash of an early F-100. During a high-speed flight over the Mojave Desert, F-100A-1-NA 52-5764 disintegrated while performing a 7G pull-up from a Mach 1.55 dive. Welch briefly survived the incident but died while being rushed to a hospital. His death led many to believe that a pilot could not survive the force of a supersonic ejection.