

BANANAS & MILKDUDS

Below is an article written by Rick Reilly of Sports Illustrated...

He details his experiences when given the opportunity to fly in an F-14 Tomcat... If you aren't laughing out loud by the time you get to 'Milk Duds', your sense of humor is seriously broken.



This message is for America's most famous athletes: Someday you may be invited to fly in the back-seat of one of your country's most powerful fighter jets. Many of you already have. John Elway, John Stockton, Tiger Woods to name a few. If you get this opportunity, let me urge you, with the greatest sincerity.... Move to Guam.

Change your name.
Fake your own death!
Whatever you do.
Do Not Go!!!
I know.

The U.S. Navy invited me to try it. I was thrilled. I was pumped. I was toast! I should've known when they told me my pilot would be Chip (Biff) King of Fighter Squadron 213 at Naval Air Station Oceana in Virginia Beach.

Whatever you're thinking a Top Gun named Chip (Biff) King looks like, triple it. He's about six-foot, tan, ice-blue eyes, wavy surfer hair, finger-crippling handshake -- the kind of man who wrestles dyspeptic alligators in his leisure time. If you see this man, run the other way. Fast.

Biff King was born to fly. His father, Jack King, was for years the voice of NASA missions. ('T-minus 15 seconds and counting'. Remember?) Chip would charge neighborhood kids a quarter each to hear his dad. Jack would wake up from naps surrounded by nine-year-olds waiting for him to say, 'We have lift off'.

Biff was to fly me in an F-14D Tomcat, a ridiculously powerful \$60 million Weapon with nearly as much thrust as weight, not unlike Colin Montgomerie. I was worried about getting airsick, so the night before the flight I asked Biff if there was something I should eat the next morning.

'Bananas,' he said.

'For the potassium?' I asked.

'No,' Biff said, 'because they taste about the same coming up as they do going down.'

The next morning, out on the tarmac, I had on my flight suit with my name sewn over the left breast. (No call sign -- like Crash or Sticky or Lead foot. But, still, very cool.) I carried my helmet in the crook of my arm, as Biff had instructed. If ever in my life I had a chance to nail Nicole Kidman, this was it.

A fighter pilot named Psycho gave me a safety briefing and then fastened me into my ejection seat, which, when employed, would 'egress' me out of the plane at such a velocity that I would be immediately knocked unconscious.

Just as I was thinking about aborting the flight, the canopy closed over me, and Biff gave the ground crew a thumbs-up in minutes we were firing nose up at 600 mph. We leveled out and then canopy-rolled over another F-14.

Those 20 minutes were the rush of my life. Unfortunately, the ride lasted 80. It was like being on the roller coaster at Six Flags Over Hell. Only without rails. We did barrel rolls, snap rolls, loops, yanks and banks. We dived, rose and dived again, sometimes with a vertical velocity of 10,000 feet per minute. We chased another F-14, and it chased us.

We broke the speed of sound. Sea was sky and sky was sea. Flying at 200 feet we did 90-degree turns at 550 mph, creating a G force of 6.5, which is to say I felt as if 6.5 times my body weight was smashing against me, thereby approximating life as Mrs. Colin Montgomerie.

And I egressed the bananas.

And I egressed the pizza from the night before.

And the lunch before that.

I egressed a box of Milk Duds from the sixth grade.

I made Linda Blair look polite. Because of the G's, I was egressing stuff that never thought would be egressed.

I went through not one airsick bag, but two.

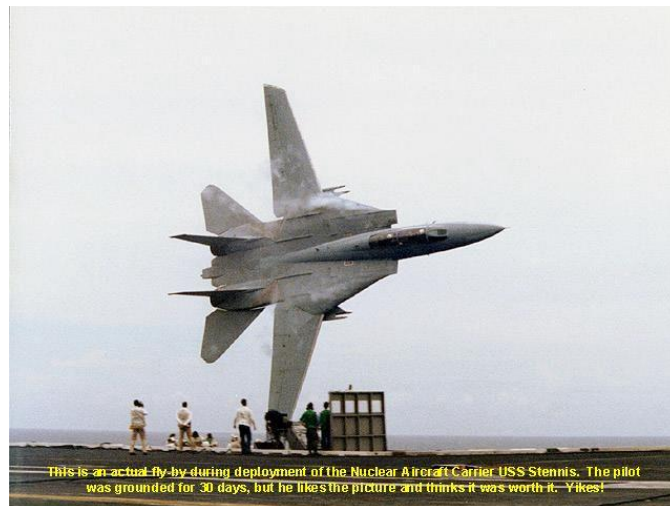
Biff said I passed out. Twice... I was coated in sweat. At one point, as we were coming in upside down in a banked curve on a mock bombing target and the G's were flattening me like a tortilla and I was in and out of consciousness, I realized I was the first person in history to throw down.

I used to know 'cool'. Cool was Elway throwing a touchdown pass, or Norman making a five-iron bite. But now I really know 'cool'. Cool is guys like Biff, men with cast-iron stomachs and freon nerves. I wouldn't go up there again for Derek Jeter's black book, but I'm glad Biff does every day, and for less a year than a rookie reliever makes in a home stand.

A week later, when the spins finally stopped, Biff called. He said he and the fighters had the perfect call sign for me. Said he'd send it on a patch for my flight suit.

What is it? I asked.

'Two Bags.'



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