

Fifty-Fifty

My 1965 Volkswagen had a heater, but it didn't do much against the subzero temperatures. Sometimes I complained that we should get a car with a decent heater. There would be ice under the accelerator, brake and clutch pedals which wouldn't thaw out for months, literally, no matter how much we ran the heater. When the ice built up to where the pedals wouldn't work anymore, I took a blowtorch and got under the steering wheel to melt ice from the pedals so we could keep driving the car. We couldn't afford to replace the VW, and I knew that. But I told myself that someday when I could afford it, I was going to buy a car with a big engine and a big heater.

The northern tip of Maine, nestled against the Canadian border, was especially bitter when strong winds would blow. Close to the north waters of the Atlantic Ocean, there was plenty of moisture for snow – averaging ten feet or more per winter. Somehow, it seemed warmer when it was snowing. Sometimes it was too cold to snow. Wind chill factors of fifty below zero were not unusual. Once the effective temperature was 85 degrees below zero. We were warned not to attempt to leave our homes. Even to go to the garage was risky. Exposed flesh froze in 15 seconds at that temperature.

My job in the Air Force at Loring Air Force Base was to work in the mockup, which is a facility that has all the electronic components of the F-106 interceptor spread out over a large work area. Aaron and I were the two airmen who worked the graveyard shift testing, calibrating or repairing the various electronic systems of the aircraft. Some nights when there was absolutely nothing to do and there were no aircraft flying, one of us would leave early. One night it was particularly cold and unusually quiet since the pilots hadn't even flown that day during the daylight. It was my turn to leave early while Aaron stayed in the mockup just in case something happened.

The rodents would get into the equipment racks. They liked to chew the electronic cables that tied our mockup subsystems together. Those cables carried voltages up to several hundred volts. When the rats would chew through the insulation and hit a high voltage line, there would inevitably be a squeal, some sparks, a dead rat, and sometimes a fire. That's about all the excitement Aaron could have looked forward to that night. Turns out that all the excitement that cold winter night was to be mine.

I left the mockup in the darkness of night and headed back to my Volkswagen. It's important to understand the physical layout of the mockup, the parking lot, and the flight line to understand what happened next. There was no parking near the mockup since that facility was next to the active runway. So my car was about 150 yards from the door out of the mockup. Between where I stood that night and my car was a taxiway, then a flat, unpaved area, another taxiway, and then the parking lot. During the last snow, the runway snowplows had piled snow from the two taxiways into the space between the taxiways. The flat space which was grass in the summer was now under some ten feet of snow, piled high by the snowplows.

Runway snowplows are impressive machines. They have to move snow a far distance, so they are built differently than snowplows you normally see used on highways. Instead of pushing the snow aside with a blade, these snowplows use a pair spiraling blades some seven feet

high. Each blade forces snow into a central area in front of the plow where another blade picks up the snow and hurls it out a chute at the top of the plow, throwing the snow forty of fifty feet away. Each blade spirals rapidly, slicing into the snow and cutting sections of it out, sending it up into the ejection chute.

Just such a snowplow had built the barrier between the mockup and the parking lot, and as I stood there in the far subzero weather, I contemplated the cold long walk around the end of the hill of snow between the taxiways. But wait. What was that sound? A powerful diesel engine could be heard, though at first I couldn't see anything. Then I spotted it: a single snowplow was out. Why was he there when the runways and taxiways were clear? I watched a few moments and then I discovered what he was doing. Also on the graveyard shift, and probably just as bored at that hour of the morning as I was, he decided to take his snow plow out and to cut a path between the mockup and the parking lot. That way, in the morning when the day crews arrived, they wouldn't have to make the long walk around the snow ridge, following the taxiway, but could cut through the path he would clear that night.

The snowplow had one small light at the very top of the rig. There was no need for more lights than that. All the operator needed to see was a space a few feet in front of the rig. At the speeds he usually went, a small light was enough. I watched that small light in the clear, dark night as it traced a circle in front of me. He hadn't been working long. The path was barely wide enough for the plow to get through. From the taxiway near the parking lot, he would start building up speed. He would turn the end of the taxiway, come around the snow ridge and make a wide arc toward the near side of the snow bank. The diesels would be running full speed and the giant blades spinning wildly when he slammed the rig into the piled-up snow. He had to hit it hard, since snow piled that high was a chore even for such a massive piece of equipment. He used only the outer edge of his snowplow blades in the high snow embankment to maintain enough power. As he churned through the barrier, snow flew wildly everywhere. He kept his foot to the throttle, grinding straight through the snow, until he broke through the other side. Then he would turn left on the taxiway, go all the way around, and repeat the process again. By watching the light and listening to the diesel engine, I discovered the pattern. He took about 90 seconds from when he left the far side of the snow bank to when he got around to the near side and slammed into to snow again. He would always choose to enlarge the cut on one side or the other, going to the left or to the right, but there seemed to be no pattern to which side he chose on any particular run.

Ninety seconds. Every time. It was impossible for him to get around any faster. I figured that if I started running for my car just as he was going through the snowbank, I could get from the mockup, across the first taxiway, through the passage he had cut in the snow, and across and off the second taxiway before he came around again for his next pass.

I timed one more pass of the plow through the cycle, watching the small light in the night and listening to the engines. Then I was ready. I ran for the opening at just the right time. The black night air was bitter cold but I didn't notice. I dashed across the first taxiway. The bitter air burned my lungs – I hadn't thought about that – but no matter, the opening through the snow was just ahead. The snow plow was safely through and somewhere on the far taxiway headed around the end again.

I entered the opening and slipped. I slid a few feet further into the space between the two walls of snow and tried to stand up. I stood for only a second and fell again. Under the snow there certainly wasn't the grass from last summer, or even hard bare ground. Under that pile of snow that had sat there for so long was a solid floor of ice. I was in the passageway, helpless to get out.

I heard the diesel engine building speed, and I knew the driver would soon be making another high speed attack on the snow bank. There was no way he could have known I was in the channel. He was on the far side of the snow when I began my run, and at three o'clock in the morning he wasn't expecting anyone there anyway. I could not get out, and I knew it. I had one chance. I would take the few seconds I had left to pin myself to one wall or the other of the narrow gap in the snow. I would be safe if the driver of the snow plow picked the other side of the wall to cut into. If he picked the side I was on, there was no hope that he would see me – and even if he did, he could not stop if he wanted to at the speeds he slammed into the wall of snow. If he picked the same side I did, I would be quickly sliced into small pieces by the swirling snow blades and thrown with the snow out the discharge chute.

Which side to pick? I had not seen any pattern. Because the snow was high, I couldn't see the plow coming around its arc. All I could hear was the diesel engine getting louder and louder – horrifyingly loud – in the night. Time stood almost motionless as I waited to see my first glimpse of the small light on top of the rig as he made the last adjustment before slamming into the snow. I pinned myself against the right wall and waited in horror as the roar of the diesel engine grew. Where was it? Surely it must almost be here? Which side would he choose? Then the now monstrous machine was there, tearing into the snow at the end of the channel. Tearing into the left side of the passageway. Snow flew everywhere and the diesel noise was deafening. I thought, "If only he can hold his track and stay against the left wall, I'll be safe." As the machine passed only a few feet away from me along the far side of the wall of snow, I realized just how massive and powerful it is. Even over the crunch of the snow and the roar of the diesel motor, I heard the unmistakable and unforgettable sound of those two spiral blades scraping and clawing mercilessly through the far wall of snow.

He went by, never seeing me pinned off to his right in the dark. Once he was past, I ran, fell, crawled and dragged myself out of the channel any way I could. Finally I was clear and onto the second taxiway – numb with cold and fear. I ran to my Volkswagen and got in. I started the motor and just sat there. I knew the heater would never get the car really warm, but I didn't care. Compared to the experience with the big diesel snow plow I had just been through, sitting in a parking lot at 3:30 in the morning in my cold VW was just where I wanted to be. I had no complaints. Being alive was more than enough.