



Alive and well, living in the home of the brave

BY SKIP HOLM

***E**ditor's Note: With the ever-increasing transition from propeller-driven aircraft to jet aircraft it has become necessary to inform the owners/pilots of all jet aircraft that it is not just a simple transition but a move into a much more complex aircraft. The L-39 Albatross seems to be the most popular jet to upgrade to. In this article, Skip Holm, a highly decorated war hero, gives us his take on the subject. Holm retired from the U.S. Air Force as a lieutenant colonel and has the highest combat time of all current and ex-Air Force pilots with well more than 1,100 hours in both F-4s and F-105s. Holm has flown the L-39 at the Reno Air Races and in half a dozen major motion picture productions, and has done testing in this aircraft for some operations.*

The transition from one aircraft to another can be easy, or not that easy, or all of the aforementioned, or only known to the FAA. Of course, the default answer to classroom questions is often "all of the above." But not here. When we look at the L-39 as a comparatively new aircraft in our warbird fleet, we see a remarkably diverse history that is hard to believe, especially when looked at by other countries that operate the L-39 with low incident and accident rates. For an aircraft we Americans af-

fectionately call the next P-51 or the Russian C-172, we have a funny way of showing our admiration. For in our L-39 community, the list of accidents is unusual and long.

We have run these puppies through fences, into one another while taxiing, into one another while flying, into people, into pets, into fuel trucks, into Jamaican female fuelers, into the water, into the ground, into most everything. We have taxied out and prepared to fly, only to shut down and get out to check nose doors, pull plugs, remove pins,

remove pitot covers, turn off switches, turn on nose switches, and remove or add assorted "gotchas." We have landed them in the dirt, across roads, across taxiways, at idle, at full power, on speed, well above speed, with hardly any speed, with no brakes, with full brakes, with blown tires, with blowing tires, on the mains, on the nose, on the flaps, on the belly, on the antennas, on purpose, and by accident.

We have flown them with doors open, doors closed, inlet plugs in, inlet plugs falling out, jackets in the in-

lets, out of the CG range, without any annual maintenance, without any multiple-year maintenance, without training, without the right training, with canopies coming off, with canopies open, with canopies fogged up, with canopies clean, with canopies chromed, with people falling out, with people parachuting out, with pilots jumping out, with people ejecting out, and with people just wanting out.

We have people who have bought, bent, burned, and crashed them. And did it again. We have people who could be aces. Five kills as a trainer ace, five kills as an owner ace. We have filmed them on the ground, in the air, over water, over our dirt, over foreign dirt, in formation, dogfighting, acro flying, tail sliding, low level, appearing, disappearing, and even crashing and burning. We have crashed them into the water, into the land, into each other, without a good reason, with a good reason, at night, in the twilight, in the daylight, in the sunlight, in the weather, and in the shade.

Ironically, and just like our favorite gorilla, all these stories of L-39s are most often the result of the pilot having his big fingers deeply in the mix, and also up his nose, with the result being that the innocent L-39 jet was just along for the ride. “And why is this happening to me?” Rebecca, Genesis, Chapter 25, asked.

That’s the question we must answer when responding to why L-39s get involved in so many incidents and accidents. A first-ever event, An American pilot who wants to become the L-39 Fighter “Top Gun Pilot,” turns this into a full-blooded battle for air safety in the flying arena, fought by old-school, old-aged, highly trained military/civilian pilots against just-out-of-air-school, new-boy, neophyte pilots from around the United States.

This “American Pilot Becomes L-39 Fighter Top Gun Pilot” event pushes ex-military elite pilots and their aircraft to the limit, flying in an arena known to them from many years of competing with other like-minded military and civilian airline-trained pilots. These elite pilots, the old and the bold, flying by the seats of their

pants, are top-gun hard runners and hard gunners, toughened by the combat sorties they still refuse to discuss. These aged winged warriors are pitted against the young and the restless, the girly-men of this century, the loud-spoken youths who have no scars from learning the hard lessons that only come from failure and having been there!

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On the other side of the ledger, low-time hotshots are eager to show the world that flying is part of their ineradicable DNA and that they are not relegated to aircraft described as “other than fighter.” They have spent a lot of time becoming comfortable with their aircraft, taking company personnel on flights, taking their families on similar flights, all to one day use the same relaxed nature—which has been so successful and real-time comforting—in their L-39 fighter flights. Their advantage, besides their obvious motivation, will be using high-tech virtual training systems never before utilized inside the warbird environment.

The outcome and therefore *the factors* relating to L-39 incidents/accidents: L-39 incidents or accidents seem to happen independent of experience. If you *are not* on a combat mission, any failed anything should be treated as a *real* problem. When we

talk about L-39s, predominantly the U.S. L-39s, we see incidents and accidents that have happened with such regularity that we are sure that both pilots can and should be defined truly as “trainees” flying those jets. Now why is that?

Lots of folks give varied and reasonable explanations for these L-39 incidents/accidents, from slow engine spool-up to sun glint from that Czech Plexiglas, but most folks agree that it has something to do with the L-39 simply being easy to fly. When an aircraft is this easy to fly, we pilots seem not to get “revved up” in our preparations or are too relaxed while flying to make the right decisions at the right time.

By way of example, I can only relate my own first experience in an L-39. I was at California City Municipal Airport one day flying a British jet—a Gnat—for Wally McDonald, when Willy Coyote (whose real name I will not disclose for fear of retribution), boasting his national accent, asked if I would like to go for a ride in his new jet, fly low over the landscape, and pick out a Christmas tree in the local forest. I, of course, said yes in several languages, for I knew Willy Coyote had knowledge of several of these languages and I wanted to make sure he fully understood that *yes* was really yes, a total yes, and not a Britney-Spears-to-the-judge “yes but only kinda yes.” So off we went into the wild (later demonstrated to be absolutely true) blue yonder, with me in the back seat, ready to shut up, sit, look, listen, and observe hands-off what this new jet could do.

As fate would have it, we never got around to looking at the landscape, or finding a Christmas tree, or even seeing what this new jet could really do. For like lightning in reverse, Willy Coyote snapped into a closed pattern, advising me that he was in the process of showing me a “gooooooood” landing pattern. I watched him go through all the rudimentary parts of doing a “gooooooood” landing pattern, such as putting down both the gear and the flaps at the appropriate spots, and then turning base and final for the touch-and-go pattern. As we proceeded down



girly-man again positioned all the parts that extend to make the landing a mild-mannered activity. Once again we turned base and final, trying to resolve and reconcile the mistakes of a few moments earlier. But as luck would have it—or rather, as no luck would have it—I again saw that we were quickly entering into that arena of unrecognizable pilot rhetoric in trying to describe either the glide slope or the final approach. Not knowing what I should do, I reached over and, once again, slammed the throttle handle to the full-up and holding position.

As expected, my actions immediately elicited an abrupt vocal response from the guy in the front. Willy Coyote, in a voice that came from a deep breath taken just before speaking, bellowed his most memorable line of that flight, saying, “I just got qualified last week in this jet! I’m the qualified one! Keep your hands off the controls!”

“Wow,” I thought, “a newbie.” And as I wondered who checked him out, the L-39 made the crushing sound of wheels hitting the California dirt, spitting out a protected Greenpeace desert turtle.

Amazed at how slow the AI-25 engine had responded, I realized that 12 seconds is an eternity while you are waiting for the engine to spool itself up. I had waited



final, I became a little anxious waiting for him to get into some sort of recognizable groove that I thought would actually get to the runway hard spot. The more we descended and the closer we got to terra firma, the more it looked to me like Willy Coyote would impact in the dirt somewhere short of the runway. Finally I could relax no longer, so I reached over and pushed up the throttle. I was not aware of the slow spool-up on the AI-25 engine before this throttle slam, so I was, on the whole, alarmed at how close to the dirt we actually got before the aircraft did the lift thing, avoiding the ground and accomplishing the go-around. (In a training jet, the back seat has the ability to override the front cockpit controls, as this is

where the instructor sits.)

At this point, I was just glad to be there, glad to have avoided the bad dirt that collects airplanes on that end of the runway, and was waiting for the accolades that come with saving the jet. Well, little did I know that Willy Coyote was not a true coyote, for coyotes always run from danger. Our Willy Coyote was indeed a Schwarzenegger girly-man who had an instant ego and did not like the fact that I had touched the sacrosanct engine handle. That said, I was amazed when we again, in a once-more-reversed, speed-of-lightning act, impulsively snapped up into the downwind for another go at what could only be said to be an act of desperation and daring. Once there, our

engine to spool itself up. I had waited too long in shoving the engine handle up to the max engine position, for we both saw and felt the jet settle into the desert cactus and sagebrush. Once grounded and scooting through the very real terra firma, I thought, “Wow, good thing the intakes are high up on the backbone, for if this would have been another of a series of jets, we would be shoving desert vegetarian vegetation down the throat of this true fossil-fuel eater.” I’m sitting there, a ride-along, crunching down the desert, realizing this has not ended up being a good plan, not a good turn of events for folks who wanted instant relief from the now-constant ground bump-de-bumps as the big jet contin-

ued to scoot down through the desert. So what was our ace, our top gun, our hero doing when and while the stuff hit the fan?

His second action (recite like a poem):

After we bumped and banged around on the ground,

Through the bunny burrows and the groundhog town,

Then getting popped into the air with that ripping sagebrush sound,

Was to pull the gear handle up! What?

“What” is right! Being that I wasn’t too sure anymore whether or not Willy Coyote had gone to the same training academy that had trained the 11 hijackers just to fly and not to land, I was watching him really, really closely, and when I saw him reach across and put his gear handle up, I knew why! I instantly put my gear handle down, for I had flown in Russian jets before and knew that the rear cockpit would override the front. At this point, I knew that we had not moved the gear since the sagebrush thump-de-bump event, so I was fairly confident that most of the landing gear was still there and that if we could just get it close to the hard spots of the runway, a landing might, could, would happen.

But this quick landing was not to be, for Willy Coyote, no longer in a mood for landing and once again confident that his jet was air bound and in flight, said with a fairly calm voice, “Let’s go look for those Christmas trees now.” Ah ha, just what I had been hoping for earlier, but now the gear was still hanging and would probably hit a tree if our luck held out, so I intervened, saying that I was now ready to go back to the barn. We reversed our course, of course, going back to do the tough job—landing this monster.

The landing was actually anticlimactic, being quite far down from the touchdown end (which was good, for we had used up our luck on this end). Once in the parking area, after disembarking from the jet-jet, I was amazed to see that there was hardly any damage to the desert-romping jet. At that point, I knew this was going to be a great airplane, and have since come to understand why people compare it lovingly to the P-51.

Never stop flying the jet, and don’t let an easy task distract you.

I sometimes think that if an airplane had a key, we would avoid a lot of accidents. The logic is that all vehicles that use keys are susceptible to being stolen, so there is always some doubt in a person’s mind about whether his vehicle is actually there. And if this logic were applied to aircraft, there would be some reason to assume that a pilot may not be prepared to fly, because he actually never really thought his aircraft was not stolen. But there is no logic to this thought, for by and large most if not all owners find their aircraft right where they left them, just like their dog with no legs. So an instant analysis of the reaction of actually finding one’s aircraft must be that most sane and sensible pilots do actually expect to find their aircraft and therefore truly know what they are intending on doing when they meet up with their aircraft on that intended flight.

So why do flights go wrong? Is it because pilots cannot normally just pull over, relax, ask for directions, and then continue? Are we susceptible to a mind-melt when caught up in a vehicle that won’t stop easily and keeps on going like the Energizer Bunny, with an eventual ending that either *tells another story* or results in a ho-hum conclusion?

It’s the “*tells another story*” that should be the subject of the “what happened” analysis, for it truly relates to what has happened, and why. So what is missing? Debriefings are what’s missing in civilian flying. Only in detailed debriefings can you get the total picture of how you were flying as interpreted by another pilot. Debriefings allow you to avoid repeated mistakes and acquire knowledge that comes from a secondary source. What is the common denominator of all accidents? You guessed it—“somebody’s gonna lose a trailer!” But why do these accidents happen to so many unsuspecting folks? Part of the answer is that we think the buckle on our hat actually does hold up our pants. Seem

logical? Well, let me explain.

Ever notice that what seems so obvious after an accident is actually the belt buckle on the head? Or the Monday morning coach will always have the answer to the mitigating circumstances that were part of the incident/accident? Or that accident boards always meet at the accident location in sunny weather? In other words, if you take risks, you run risks. So don’t be so surprised when your L-39 jet gets caught up in one of these stories.

We may also find that new L-39 pilots are too unfamiliar with an aircraft that operates with too few handles, or are too uncomfortable with the higher-altitude arena they are flying in, or were not trained enough and are too dog scared with something unknown, or think that they are not capable of doing what other pilots can do.

What is the difference between the pea soupers and the roast beefers? All pilots I have ever flown with are pretty much the same, except some of them want to experience the unknown areas, the “edge of the envelope” areas of their aircraft, while some do not want to fly anywhere except right in the middle of the good-handling, good-feeling, comfortable cozy-chair spot. “If I’m not in my spot, then I’m nowhere I recognize, and occasionally it scares the be-jickens out of me,” said the cozy jet pilot.

And these uncomfortable areas might be high altitude, high speed, low speed, different type engine, fewer handles, wrong-hand handles, different sounds, heavier machine, more inertia, less get-up-and-go, different position, less visibility, wrong visibility, or just an unknown aircraft, any of which may turn any in-flight perturbation of an otherwise expected smooth flight into a mind-bending major emergency.

With that in mind, the advice you should follow is fairly simple:

- Don’t get caught with on-off decisions.
- Make gradual changes.
- Make gradual decisions.
- Fly the jet.

