

photograph its return flight and landing. Central Control signaled us to take off shortly after noon. With us was another jet, the "director aircraft." Its job was to take over radio control of the missile and bring it back in.

Central Control vectored us into a position where we could rendezvous with the "bird." That's a ticklish moment. You always hope those fellows on the ground know what they're doing. Sometimes we can spot the "bird" at 10 miles or more. At other times, we can see it only two or three miles ahead, depending upon visibility and other factors.

THIS HAPPENED to be a perfect day with a clear blue sky and big, billowy patches of clouds spotted here and there. At 30,000 feet we were well above the clouds. We saw the "bird" in plenty of time, its bright-red paint glistening in the early afternoon sun and contrasting sharply with the dark-blue Atlantic.

"Tally ho!" pierced my headset. That was the pilot's signal to the director aircraft and Central Control that we had the "bird" in sight. He radioed our position as we went into a sharp left bank. The "bird" shot by and the chase was on.

It wasn't wasting any time that day, so Central Control slowed it down for us. The director aircraft moved in on the right rear of the "bird" while we moved to the left. I was all set to shoot motion pictures with my B-1A, a hand-carried camera specially designed for aerial work.

We were flying a few feet below and about 125 feet to the side of the "bird" when I started shooting. I filmed for about 30 seconds from this angle and then signaled the pilot to pull up level with the "bird's" wing and move in closer—50 to 75 feet. I had no trouble at all reading the fine print on the missile's surface!

Then, over our radio headsets, came instructions from Central Control: "In 20 seconds, Dial 31." That meant that in 20 seconds the director aircraft would lower the landing skids on the "bird" to create drag and burn up excess fuel. It would be dangerous to set down on the landing strip with too much fuel aboard.

"Dial 31!" The skids started down and I was taking one of the shots I had come after. Then, in a finger snap, something flew off the "bird." The missile lurched abruptly to the left, heading right for us!

I was peering through my view-

finder, and suddenly it got too crowded. My legs and arms went rubbery.

We banked sharply left and up and then right in an evasive maneuver, hoping the erratic missile would pass under us. For one long, trembling moment it seemed as if we had made it. But then there was a heavy thud right under our seats, and our plane bounced crazily in the air.

My first reaction was to grope for the seat-ejection handle. But our plane still seemed to be operating normally. I scanned the fire-warning lights, but nothing showed up.

Then the right wing caught my glance. Around it was wrapped a huge silver needle!

I didn't know what it was, but I knew it didn't belong there. Looking back over the wing, I could see the "bird" itself spinning down into the ocean.

The pilot signaled that our controls were not acting properly, but he still had control of the plane. The fuel tank on our right wing was shaking badly, and looked as if it might fall off. We cut our speed so as not to do any more damage to the wing.

"Are you okay?" radioed the director aircraft. "Are you going to have to ditch?" We were about 125 miles at sea—a long swim.

"We're going to try to make it."

With resignation, I settled back in my seat. I studied the silver needle twisted around the wing and finally realized it was the nose of the missile, known technically as the instrumentation boom. We had sheared it right off. I shot some pictures of it just for the record.

We joked on the way back, but only to cover our nervousness. As the minutes went by, I realized what had almost happened, and what still might happen!

We didn't know about our landing gear. The pilot didn't want to toy with it because it might work just once, and that once had to count.

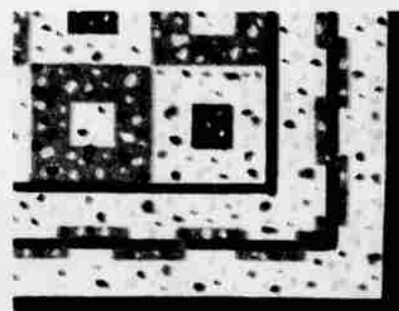
When we finally reached Patrick, we didn't bother with our usual "break-away" over the tower. It was a straight-in approach. Ambulances and fire trucks were standing by.

The panel lights—"three in the green"—told us our wheels were down and locked. Our landing was pretty neat, considering the shape we were in.

Did being hit by a missile sour me on "chase photography"? Not at all. I was back chasing another "bird" three days later, and I've been doing it ever since.



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