

## **Going Down the Runway Backwards by Michael Merrill (20)**

In February 1980 I flew a T-39 Sabreliner, a twin-engine jet aircraft, from NAS Pensacola to NAS Miramar (became MCAS Miramar in 1997). We were on a logistics mission and flew out to Miramar on the 21st of February.

I remember watching the US Hockey team beat the Soviet team for the 1980 Olympic Gold Medal on the 22nd at the Miramar Officer's Club.

We departed Miramar on Sunday the 24th bound for NAS Corpus Christy, TX to pick up the NARF Pensacola Skipper and return to NAS Pensacola the following day (Monday). On takeoff we were not told that the short field arresting gear cable was deployed, and on the takeoff roll the main wheels touched the short field arresting gear cable just before liftoff. If we had been told that the arresting gear cable was deployed, we would have taxied over it and commenced our takeoff roll after crossing the cable. Didn't seem to be a big deal at the time.

Anyway, the flight time to NAS Corpus was a little less than 3 hours. When we got to Corpus the sun was just going down and it was starting to get dark as we descended for landing.

Touchdown was made normally, but shortly after landing the left main gear strut collapsed and caused the aircraft to begin making weird movements on the runway. The left wing was tipped drastically toward the runway. In order to try and keep the aircraft steady and straight, I applied all the pressure I could using both feet on the starboard wheel brakes to blow the starboard tires, to try and give the right side of the aircraft some level of added traction. Also turned the yoke all the way as far as it would go to the right, to keep the left wing as high as it would go. But alas the starboard tire did not blow, and the aircraft began to yaw heavily to the left and then did a ground loop and the aircraft began traveling backwards on the runway eventually settling off the right side of the runway. The left-wing tip came about 3-6 inches from hitting the runway as it was yawing to start its backwards motion. If it had hit the runway, the plane would most likely have flipped over, and I wouldn't be writing this today. We finally came to a stop with the aircraft facing the opposite direction in which we had landed. The tower sent emergency vehicles to check us out. Thankfully none of us were injured in any way. However, we were a little shook up over the whole thing.

The tower then dispatched some maintenance vehicles to raise the landing gear and put the gear on a tow truck to get the aircraft off the side of the runway and tow us to a hangar. When the main mount was hoisted and put on a special towing apparatus the tow truck began to tow the aircraft to a hangar. The tow truck towed the aircraft about 50 feet, and wouldn't you know it, the right tires blew out. The maintenance team at the hangar discovered that the reason the strut had collapsed was due to the strut's Schrader valve failure.

The Schrader valve is a pneumatic tire valve used to pump air into tires and allows air to flow in only one direction. All automobile tires have the valve.

Interestingly enough, I was the main test pilot for the T39 at the time & flew both Navy and Air Force T39s since we were the overhaul facility for all T39 aircraft.