KEEP YOUR SPEED UP!

As a former SR-71 pilot and

keynote speaker, the question I'm most often asked is : "How fast would that

SR-71 fly ?" I can be assured of hearing that question several times at any event I attend.

It's an interesting question, given the aircraft's proclivity for speed. But there really isn't a single number to give ­­­––– as the turbo ramjet would always give you a little more speed. (If you wanted it to . . .)

It was common to see 35 miles a minute. But we typically flew a programmed Mach number.

But because we never wanted to harm the plane in any way, we never let it run-out to any limits of temperature or speed.

Thus, each SR-71 pilot had his own personal high speed that he saw at some point during our missions.

I saw my highest speed over Libya when Khadafy fired two missiles my way: max power was in order.

Let's just say that the Blackbird truly loved speed ­­––– and effortlessly took us to high Mach numbers . . we had not previously seen.

So it was with great surprise, when at the end of one of my presentations, someone asked, "What was the SLOWEST . . you ever flew the Blackbird ?"

This was a first. After giving it some thought, I was reminded of a story that I had never shared before, and relayed the following: I was flying the SR-71 out of RAF Mildenhall, England ,with my backseater, Walt Watson. We were returning from a mission over Europe and the Iron Curtain when we received a radio transmission from home base.

As we scooted across Denmark in three minutes, we learned that a small RAF base in the English countryside had requested an SR-71 fly-by.

The Commander of air cadets there was a former Blackbird pilot who thought it would be a motivating moment for the young lads to see the mighty SR-71 perform a low approach.

No problem, we were happy to do it.

After a quick aerial refueling over the North Sea , we proceeded to find the small airfield. In the back seat, Walter had a myriad of sophisticated navigation equipment and he began to vector me toward the field.

Descending to subsonic, we found ourselves over a densely wooded area in the slight haze.

Like most former WWII British airfields, the one we were looking for had a small tower and little surrounding infrastructure. Walter told me we were close and that I should be able to see the field.

But as far as I could see in the haze, I saw nothing but trees. We got a little lower, and I pulled the throttles back from our 325 knot cruise.

With the gear up ––– anything under 275 knots **(316 mph)** was plain uncomfortable. Walt said we're practically over the field. Looking hard, I saw nothing that looked like an airfield.

I banked the jet and started a gentle circling maneuver. . hoping to pick up anything that looked like a field. Meanwhile on the ground, the Commander had taken the Cadets up on the control tower's catwalk to get a prime view.

It was a quiet, still day with no wind and partial gray overcast. Walter continued to give me indications that the field should be below us, but in the overcast and haze, I couldn't see it.

But the longer we continued to circle and peer out . . the slower we got. With our throttles way back, the awaiting cadets heard silence.

I must have had good instructors in my flying career, as something told me I better "cross-check the gauges."

As I noticed the airspeed indicator s-l-i-d-e below 160 knots **(180 mph)**, my heart stopped, as my adrenalin-filled left hand slammed both throttles FULL FORWARD, aka "Balls to the Wall !"

At this point we weren't really flying, but were falling in a slight bank. At the moment both afterburners lit with a thunderous roar of flame, the aircraft fell into full view of the shocked observers on the catwalk on the tower.

Shattering the absolute silence of the morning, they now had 107 feet of fire-breathing titanium in their faces as the plane leveled and accelerated in full-burner, on the *their side* of the infield much closer than expected. It could only be described as some sort of ultimate "knife-edge" aerobatic pass.

We proceeded back to Mildenhall without incident ––– not saying a word to each other for those next 14 minutes. After landing, our commander greeted us . . and we were both certain he was reaching for our wings.

Instead, he heartily shook our hands and said the Commander had told him it was the greatest SR-71 fly-by he had ever seen. Especially how we had surprised them with such a precise maneuver that could only be described as ––– breathtaking.

Apparently, some of the cadet's hats were blown off. The sight of the "plan view" of the plane in full afterburner dropping right in front of them was stunning and unbelievable.

Walt and I both understood the concept of "breathtaking" very well that morning, and we sheepishly replied that the Cadets seemed just excited to see our low approach.

As we retired to the equipment room to change from space suits to flight suits, we just sat there.... and hadn't spoken a word since "the pass."

Finally, Walter looked at me and said : "I saw One hundred fifty-six knots."

"What did you see" asked Walt ? Trying to find my voice I stammered "One hundred fifty-two..." **(175 mph)**

We sat in silence for a moment. Then Walt calmly said "Don't ever do that to me again. . . ."

I never did, and not sure I could.

A year later, Walter and I were having lunch in the Mildenhall Officer's club, and overheard an officer talking to some cadets about an SR-71 fly-past that he'd seen.

Of course, by now the story included kids blown off the tower, and screaming as the heat of the jet singed their eyebrows.

As we Stood there with lunch trays in our hands, the officer noticed our HABU shoulder patch icon of a deadly snake asked us to verify to the Cadets that such an event occurred.

Walt just shook his head and said, "It was probably just a routine low approach –­–– they're pretty impressive in that airplane."

Impressive ––– indeed.

Little did I realize that LOW SPEED experience . . would become one of the most requested stories. It's ironic, that people now became very interested in how slow the World's fastest jet aircraft can fly.

***~ Brian Shul***

**Reported by Brian Shul, Retired SR-71 Blackbird Pilot from "*Plane and Pilot Magazine*."**

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*After reading this article the reader should have a good understanding of what I mean when I say “Keep Your Speed Up.” I doubt that there is a pilot still living than hasn’t found him or her self going too slow on occasion. One is always grateful to have survived the experience. ~Adverse Yaw*