

“Punching out!”
WGCDR AI Curr’s amazing story of ejecting from an F-111
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AIR FORCE
ICON: WGCDR AI Curr with a picture of himself at RAAF Base East Sale in 1977, and below inset, being interviewed by the media about his ejection from an F-111 in 1979. Photos: LAC Aaron Curran

They say the best thing to do if thrown from a horse is to get straight back on, but what if you were thrown 500 feet from an out-of-control aircraft at high speed? Just ask WGCDR AI Curr from 82WG. Known as ‘the ejection’, the traumatic incident occurred on August 24, 1979, when then FLTLT AI Curr and pilot FLGOFF Mark Kelly were part of a 1SQN F-111 maritime exercise in New Zealand. WGCDR Curr’s aircraft, A8-137, was part of a four-ship take off from Ohakea near Wellington.

“It had been raining heavily for three days and it was flooding onto the left side of the runway,” he recalled. “Most runways have a ‘crown’ in the middle and the water runs off the sides. This particular runway had the drain on one-half of the left side of the runway, so all the water ran there. Half-way down the runway a big puddle, that we knew nothing about, formed in wet conditions.” The first two of the four aircraft took off by going on the right side of the runway. Then it was 137’s turn. “Just before the nose wheel made rotate speed at 135 knots, it hit this huge puddle and sprayed massive amounts of water into the intakes causing both engines to stall,” WGCDR Curr said.

“We couldn’t stop because the wheels were just hydroplaning and even though we applied maximum braking, we only lost 30 knots of speed in 5000 feet of runway.” WGCDR Curr placed his hand on the ejection handle shortly after the engines stalled because he knew they were not going to stop and coming up fast was the end of the runway with a 200ft drop. “I knew I should have pulled it straight away but I just couldn’t do it,” he said. “I was hoping beyond hope that something would happen – I don’t know what – maybe the hand of God would stop us and

say 'be more careful next time boys'." Just before the end of the runway WGCDR Curr pulled the handle and the rocket motor fired, burning the grass at the end of the runway.

"I remember the bang and then blacked out because we were pulling 20Gs," he said. "It shot us 500ft in the air and then all the magic worked up there in the clouds. We popped out of the cloud cover with parachutes deployed." He came around and all he could see was smoke and fire below. It was then that WGCDR Curr thought they were going to land in the burning wreck of the F-111. "I was heavier than Mark so we drifted to the right, landing at 15Gs next to the wreck," WGCDR Curr said. "It was like jumping off a 10 metre roof tied to a wooden chair."

WGCDR Curr was injured but not as bad as FLGOFF Kelly who suffered crushed vertebrae in his back and thoracic crushes as well. He said he got out first and saw the aircraft exploding everywhere with chaff and fuel going up. "I took off and then stopped and thought I could not leave Mark behind so I went back, opened his canopy and forklifted him out," he said. "He weighed 150 pounds and I couldn't normally lift 30 pounds in that manner, so it just goes to show what you can do with adrenalin running through your veins."

Due to the shock and adrenalin, he went to lay FLGOFF Kelly on the ground but noticed there was water on the ground, so then he ran past the module and put him on the parachute. "I put him down and then went protective, not thinking what I was doing," he said. "So when the medics arrived I stood up and pushed the first guy away." WGCDR Curr went back and lay beside FLGOFF Kelly to make sure he was OK. "I then felt a hand on my back. It was a reservist doctor who said "it's OK son, we've got him now'." "Then I just collapsed in shock beside him."