

Five Hundred Mile-Per-Hour Submarine

It's ten o'clock at night and I'm alone in my F-16 over the Gulf of Mexico. Thirty five miles from shore, I'm heading south, leaving the coast of Florida behind at the rate of six miles every minute. All I can see is ocean, no land anywhere. Here at 35,000 feet I'm flying in clear air, above a solid layer of cloud that starts about 10,000 feet below.

I'm on a solo night mission — testing a new radar. My job is to fly a straight course for 100 miles away from the shore radar, then turn around and fly the same course back toward the radar, then turn around and fly away again—out and back, out and back.

It's after hours for most folks. Families have finished their dinners and have put the kids to bed; and are settling down for a few quiet minutes before turning out the lights. But not me. The mission involves just a few people. Me in my single-seat F-16, the test crew on the ground at the radar site, and some air traffic controllers monitoring me on their radars to see that I don't stray from my assigned airspace.

Eleven o'clock—the test ends. I'm about 120 miles south of the Florida coast. That cloud deck is still down below; and there's a full moon.

The radio is silent. I'm on a military frequency and no one is talking. I have my microphone turned off so I can't hear myself breathing. My sound-deadening crash helmet reduces the aircraft noise to a faint, distant roar.

I head home. I look up at the night sky, stars and moon shining brightly behind the array of cockpit lights reflected by my canopy—a clear plexiglass bubble that extends up from about my waist. I reach down and turn off the cockpit lights. Instantly the canopy disappears. If I keep my eyes level, it looks and feels like there is no airplane, just me, racing along the night sky. Above is the inky black expanse filled with bright stars and a big golden moon. Far below shines the golden, moonlit expanse of the upper surface of the cloud deck.

I slowly descend to just above 25,000 feet. I'm close enough to the clouds to see my speed, and even an F-16-shaped shadow racing along its surface. I ease myself down further, until I'm just skimming the top of the deck. It is very well defined. At one altitude is solid cloud, and it seems just a foot or two above it is perfectly clear air. At 500 mph it feels like I'm the world's fastest speedboat roaring silently across the golden rippled surface of this cloud-ocean occupying the high night sky. I look over my shoulder. My passage is marked by a horizontal spiral of golden cloud-mist extending back to the black horizon, kicked up and twirled by my silent but furious passage along its surface.

I ease the slightest forward pressure on the stick and the golden cloud-waters creep upward around my aircraft. Now I can no longer see my wings. Inches away from my left and right elbows, just outside the thin skin of the cockpit, the clouds rush by. The sense of silent velocity is heart-stopping. Now the nose of my airplane, and my cockpit, and me are all that remain visible; all that exist above the surface of this golden ocean. I see myself skimming along the surface of this golden world wingless, an anti-gravity spaceship suspended by invisible powers.

I ease on a little more forward pressure, and inch by inch I descend into the "sea" of golden moon-washed cloud. Now it's just me above the sea of gold. My lights are off, my canopy is invisible, I keep my eyes level so I can't see the fuselage just below my line of sight. I ease down an inch more. Now it is just my shoulders and head streaming along the surface of this ocean at 500 mph. I imagine I'm in the conning tower of the fastest submarine in the universe, quietly speeding along, mostly submerged, just the conning tower extending above the surface of this golden ocean of this strange moonlit world 25,000 feet above the Gulf of Mexico. I hold my breath, time seems suspended, the only movement is the golden cloud-ocean streaming by my shoulders . . .

The radio comes alive, "Cutty 21, descend to five thousand, call passing flight level 180, contact approach control on 134.5." Abruptly I'm jerked back into the real world.

With my left thumb I press the transmit button on the throttle and say, "Cutty 21, roger, cleared to five, call passing 180, good night." I reach down and turn the cockpit lights back up, the cockpit reappears reflecting the lights. I look down, check the instruments: wings level, nose level, heading correct, airspeed 500. Getting ready to transition to instruments, I ease off the throttle slightly, the airspeed starts to creep down: 480, 450, . . . It continues to bleed off, I bring the power back up a bit to catch it at 300. Holding this airspeed, I ease forward on the stick. Quickly the golden ocean rises up and engulfs me, shutting off the moon as I descend into the cloudy depths.

For a moment my imagination returns to a few minutes before. I descend the conning tower ladder, slam the hatch shut, twirl the locking ring, hit the klaxon button which begins to sound its alarm, "Dive! Dive!"