

Maloney's Pony Nellis Crash – The Pilots Story

As a young wingman in the 27th, I didn't even know we had a jet with nose art until the morning of March 21st, 1996. I went out to my assigned jet the morning of a Green Flag exercise and saw tail number 2023, Maloney's pony. I was number two in a formation takeoff. At the time, we were having all kinds of afterburner ignition problems so my flight lead had briefed we would select afterburners at 100 knots. We were flying with two external fuel tanks, it was relatively warm and we were taking off with a 10 knot tailwind for noise abatement. I will spare you all the accident investigation details but basically a foreign object (FOD) lodged in my nozzle control screw causing an explosion in my right afterburner and forcing the nozzle to stick wide open right around liftoff time. I got airborne maybe 50 feet above the runway and then the jet started losing airspeed and descending. I was out of runway to land, forcing me to eject just at the point of impact. The jet was found with both throttles in full afterburner and it took the investigation guys quite a while to figure out what happened. I was cleared of any wrong-doing, thankfully.

While the press reported "minor" injuries, after the fire melted my parachute panels (see photo), I fell from about 75 feet into the burning wreckage shattering my pelvis, sacrum, wrist, and elbow and suffering burns on my elbows, knees and back. The fire trucks were changing out at the time of the crash and were quickly on the scene saving my life. I spent several weeks in the hospital including about a week in the ICU with two immediate surgeries and then some more later.

I returned to flying 6 months later. One ride with a squadron pilot in a two-seat model, so I could get my landing currency back, and I was back fully mission capable. Takeoffs, however, still to this day elevate my heart rate, even in the back of a Southwest 737, where I find myself quite often traveling for business.

Back in the squadron after my accident, I got the honor to meet Tom Maloney and he gave me a copy of his book. He signed, it "To Arson, the only pilot who could bring down Maloney's Pony". Hopefully it is still in the squadron library. The nose art you saw in the squadron bar was indeed from the front panel of 2023, it survived the crash.

After I returned to flying, the squadron got F-15 tail number 1023 and designated it the new Maloney's pony. The first time I flew it, they painted my name on the side of the jet. Thereafter, it was the pride of the fleet. I flew for 3 and half more years in the squadron including two deployments supporting the no-fly zone over Iraq. Despite it almost killing me I still loved flying the F-15, it was all I ever wanted to do from when I was 13 years old.

Mike "Arson" Fontaine







