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Faster than Sound
Continued from page 30

like a gray curtain. Finally, there is only one light, directly in front of you. Then it too fades behind the curtain. Meanwhile an automatic camera is taking pictures of your face. You look like a lunatic—eyes and jaw droop helplessly. Arms and legs feel as if they were stuffed with lead. A few seconds later you sink into unconsciousness.

The centrifuge has made valuable contributions to aero-medical science. For example, enough is known about man's reaction to the forces of gravity to construct an "anti-G suit" which, by applying tremendous pressure at sensitive spots on the pilot's body, retards the draining of blood to the extremities, doubles a pilot's resistance to blackout.

Pressure Blast

In the basement of one of the Wright Field buildings I saw rows of pressure chambers, used to test man's ability to survive the sudden rush of oxygen and low pressure encountered at high altitudes.

An operator was standing beside the controls outside a chamber. "We're simulating a pressurized cabin at high altitude," he explained. "It's very comfortable in there now, but suppose something should happen to the pressure mechanism. How could we protect pilot and crew from loss of oxygen? See the brown paper covering that porthole? At the right moment it'll stick my fist through it. The effect will be as if the cabin were punctured by a enemy shell. 'Explosive decompression,' they call it. Your insides feel as if they're being pumped up with gas. Air rushes out of your nose and mouth. You cough. Perhaps bubbles form in the blood stream. That's painful, like having a peacock-made glove put over your hands and feet again."

On V-E day the Germans knew more about supersonic flight than we did. A number of German scientists accepted our invitation to continue their work over here. Pioneering in the uncharted field of high-frequency sound is one of their new movements. At 600 miles an hour, some planes generate 300 times as much noise as they would at 300 miles per hour. At supersonic speed, a plane will generate noises which, although inaudible, may cause discomfort, nausea, failure of muscular co-ordination, and possibly death. The Air Force has plans for a machine to produce sounds up to 200,000 cycles. Most of us cannot hear above 15,000 cycles. Therefore, delicate instruments to record the noises are also being perfected.

Although anti-G suits and pressurized ejection capsules might reduce the number of fatalities, commercial passengers will probably be as wary of these as they are of parachute jumps.

"If anything goes wrong at supersonic speeds, the consequences will be serious," says a Navy technician. "In my opinion, thinking up escape devices is about as futile as trying to use a styrofoam pail on an air-skateboard!"

For many years the airlines will probably be satisfied to stay below 40,000 feet and 500 miles an hour. The risks at higher altitudes and speeds are much too great. At 80,000 feet, outside temperature drops to 60 below. But keeping warm will be no problem. Your tremendous speed will generate heat up to 400 degrees inside the cabin. Powerful refrigeration will be needed to keep it livable.

Even if safety devices are perfected, cost of traveling faster than sound will keep it out of reach of the general public until some new form of propulsion—perhaps atomic energy—is devised to replace rockets. The Air Force estimates it must spend at least $100,000,000 to develop rocket engines for military use. For commercial planes, the cost would be even greater.

Although these problems sound imposing, they are being tackled by young men whose minds are un fettered by tradition. To them there is nothing fantastic in the prospect of shooting off into space in a rocket ship and waiting for the earth to turn to the planet you want to go to. They feel man will soon conquer space, and that motion will be primarily vertical.

Speedway, Blerodown

Although speed itself is no problem, passengers could not survive the sudden acceleration and deceleration of such flights. For this reason, even after safety problems are solved, supersonic planes will probably keep their speed changes under a maximum of 64 feet per second every second. In other words, they will be constantly but gradually increasing speed until reaching the halfway point of their flight, and then will slowly decelerate.

Inching these limitations in their slide-rule calculations, two scientists estimate that, no matter how fast your plane, the minimum time you could fly comfortably from your present location to the most distant point on earth is 40 hours. Which really seems fast enough.

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