

Catholic Priest Swaps Collar For Flight Suit—and Mach II

By BOB LAWRENCE

Rev. Richard E. Spellman swapped his clerical collar for a flight suit today and became the first clergyman known to have flown twice the speed of sound, about 1,500 miles an hour.

The dynamic little priest, an airborne chaplain during World War II and a licensed pilot for 24 years, piloted a Lockheed F104 Starfighter and took instructions from a Mason, of all people.

That was Maj. William Cato, F104 instructor pilot at the Air Force Special Weapons Center, Kirtland AF Base.

"He did beautifully," Maj. Cato said.

'Got One Nearer'

"At least I got one Mason nearer to Heaven," Father Spellman joked after the needle-nosed, stub-winged jet fighter landed.

Both agreed it was an ecumenical venture, and for Father Spellman "the most thrilling flight I've ever made. Wow! That's a real bird, that Starfighter."

Father Spellman followed through on the controls while Maj. Cato took the jet to 35,000 feet. Then came a few turns—and the only flaw of the flight, because of a compass which is "backward" to most pilots.

"I was 'Wrong-Way Corrigan' at Mach II," Father Spellman laughed.

"He caught on real fast," Maj. Cato insisted. "He's a great little pilot."

The pastor of Our Lady of the Most Holy Rosary Church kicked the jet wide open. "There was just a little buffeting when we broke the sound barrier," he said.

After that it was smooth as silk, till we decelerated. There I was, my body going along at 1,500 miles an hour, feeling like the plane was behind me.

'It's Fantastic'

"It's fantastic what that plane will do."

The Mach II rate of twice the speed of sound was achieved over the old Los Lunas bombing range, after an approach from west to east from St. John to Corona, set up so that sonic booms bother the fewest people.

Only a 50-mile distance was needed to rev the jet up. That's about two minutes, roughly, in a Starfighter.

Maj. Cato said he was nev-



MACH II BRIEFING: Maj. William Cato (left) tells the Rev. Richard E. Spellman how to go about flying at twice the speed of sound. Father Spellman, with Maj. Cato along, did just that today and became the first known clergyman to fly that fast—about 1,500 miles an hour. (Staff photo)

er worried, though he had to bail out of a jet last spring.

"I told him (Father Spellman) before we took off that if we got into trouble he should contact his Boss."

Father Spellman, a veteran of more than 2,000 hours in the air who holds single- and multi-engine and instrument flight ratings, was openly jubilant and still excited, several minutes after the flight.

He taught navigation to Naval air cadets in 1941, was ordained in 1943, the year he bought his first airplane, and joined the Army in 1945 as a chaplain, serving with the 101st Airborne Division in

France. Later he served with the 33rd Division in Japan.

He Transferred

He transferred to the Air Force in 1946, serving in Newfoundland, Florida and Johnston Island in the Pacific. He had a parish 1,000 miles long, serving Air Force men as far west as the Marshall Island Group.

Father Spellman received a "Mac Buster" certificate and scale model of the F104 from Col. Jerome Fischer after the flight.

"Two more hours and we'll check him out," Col. Fischer joked.

"I'm ready," Father Spellman declared.