

John Stapp

(John Paul Stapp)

July 11, 1910 (Bahia, Brazil) – Nov 13, 1999 (Alamogordo, NM)

DR. JOHN STAPP HOLDS the record as the fastest man on earth, becoming so in 1954, and he still owns that record. No one has traveled faster on the face of the planet than Dr. Stapp.

If you were an adult in 1954, there was no way that you didn't hear about the ride he took. It was on the front page of all the newspapers, on radio and shown in movie theater newsreels. For the handful of families who had a television in 1954, they could see the incredible few seconds of action in black and white, up close and personal, right there in their living rooms.

So how fast did Stapp go?

To warm up your mental processes, think about this.

Sound travels slightly over 761 miles per hour. In 1954, research scientist Dr. John Stapp traveled aboard a rocket sled at 632 miles per hour, and he did it more than once.

In non-scientific terms, but using another example to put what he did in perspective, Dr. Stapp traveled faster for five seconds than a .45-caliber bullet travels as it leaves the muzzle of a handgun. And not mentioned yet in this story, is that as soon as he reached top speed, he was brought to an eyeball-popping, teeth-rattling stop in the space of 1.5 seconds.

Here is what was involved in Dr. Stapp's research.

After being strapped into a boxy-looking rocket sled at one end of a set of railroad tracks, Stapp would give a five-second countdown, and on zero, the rocket propelling the vehicle would be fired.

Stapp would accelerate from a standstill to 632 miles per hour in the space of five seconds, and then decelerate to a dead stop in a second-and-a-half flat!

During the deceleration, Dr. Stapp was subjected to 43-Gs or the equivalent of slamming a vehicle front-end first into a concrete wall at seventy miles per hour. Fortunately, Stapp's experiment didn't call for running into any concrete walls.

The unusual experiment would leave Dr. Stapp temporarily blind for about two hours as his eyeballs would nearly pop out of their sockets during the ride.

A story in the *New York Herald Tribune* called him the “gentleman who can stop on a dime and give you ten cents change.” This wasn’t the first time nor the last time that Dr. Stapp subjected himself to test the limits of the human body.

During his years of service as an Air Force medical researcher, he was the willing subject of twenty-six potentially lethal experiments.

In 1949, during one of those rocket-sled experiments, the outcome, or in this case, the failure to achieve a result, became famous as a *behavioral law*.

The law remains referenced to this day by everyone from the person who waits on you at your favorite fast-food restaurant, to the supervisor who conducts your performance evaluations, to your “better half,” and to others as well.

You’ve recited the “law” yourself, guaranteed, or been a victim of that behavioral law, and most likely without you ever knowing where or how it originated.

In 1949, Dr. Stapp was researching the effects of rapid acceleration, or G-forces on different body parts. His assistant for the experiment was Air Force Captain Edward A. Murphy, Jr., a graduate of the United States Air Force Institute of Technology at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base in Ohio.

Captain Murphy was also the man who designed the harness used to strap Dr. Stapp into the rocket sled. The harness also contained, arranged in sequence, sixteen different sensors to measure the effects of G-forces on different parts of Stapp’s body.

Although Murphy’s harness required the proper alignment of the sixteen sensors to work properly, it was also possible to inadvertently misalign the sensors. In the case of the latter, the harness would still secure Dr. Stapp’s body to the sled, but the sensors would fail to collect any data.

On that fateful day in 1949, Captain Murphy secured the data-collecting harness on Dr. Stapp and performed the countdown. The rocket was fired, and the sled made its usual

five-second dash before coming to a blister-producing 1.5 second stop.

The sled door was opened, and Dr. Stapp staggered away from the sled to relax, his eyes full of blood and his body showing a fresh set of skin sores from the rapid start and stop.

When Captain Murphy looked at the sensors, none of them registered any data. He had carelessly misaligned the first sensor causing all subsequent sensors to be misaligned as well.

The experiment had been a five-second ride to hell and back with nothing to show for the trip.

Dr. Stapp was also well-known for his sense of humor.

In fact, in 1992, he published a book of aphorisms and adages, and on this day, he was about to add one to his collection that would become his most famous.

After the sled-ride and likely while Dr. Stapp's nose was still dripping blood, Captain Murphy sheepishly admitted to having connected the sensors improperly, ending his apology by saying:

If there are two or more ways to do something and one of those results in a catastrophe, then someone will do it that way.

Dr. Stapp may have nodded in agreement, but he captured the essence of Captain Murphy's twenty-five-word apologetic conclusion in eight short words:

Anything that can go wrong, will go wrong.

He named it "Murphy's Law" in honor of his assistant, Captain Edward A. Murphy, Jr., and America has been referencing that behavioral law for over sixty-five years now.

And, as mentioned upfront, you may have been a victim of that law sometimes yourself.

*
**

The universal aptitude for ineptitude makes any human accomplishment an incredible miracle.

John Stapp (1910–1999) physician, biophysicist