Continuing to fly until after midnight on 10-June 1969, I was the pilot of a single seat A-7
Corsair light-attack jet aircraft that departed the flight deck of the USS Constellation and plunged
into the Pacific Ocean some 60 miles off Southern California.

The mishap occurred at the end of a marathon 23-hour day to culminate with the first of six scheduled night carrier landings. The event was to have marked my final night of initial carrier qualification training to become a re- replacement fighter pilot in the Far Eastern fleet.

The voice of Connie's final approach controller came through the headset loud and clear :

" Corsair 202 is on course / on glide slope / at three-quarters of a mile / call the ball."

That was my cue to get off the gages and fly the final few seconds of the approach visually. A light drizzle was falling from the low hanging overcast barely above the boat's landing pattern,
but the visibility was good underneath. And sea state was calm.

The A-7 aircraft was strapped around my waist . . for many hours . . that day. It was the Navy's newest light-attack carrier jet. And I was proud to be one of the first pilots selected to zoom around in it.

" Two-Zero-Two Corsair. Ball. Fuel state 4.0 " I replied as my ' scan ' shifted way from the night instruments to fasten on the ' meatball ' of amber light beamed aft from a landing mirror on the   back edge of a four-acre flight deck.

Alarmingly, the ' seat of my pants . . ' told me ' the plane was too high . . But the ball was centered on the mirrored ' ball ' undeniably confirming my being on the final approach's glide-
slope.
So I talked to myself : **ignorebrainlookatball** [ignore the brain . . watch the ball !]

My 4,000 lbs of gas was a comfortable reserve . . ample ' nuff to make it around the boat's landing pattern . . couple times more and still have enough fuel before I had to say : " BINGO FUEL " put my tail ' twixt my legs then divert to a land-based airfield.

" Roger ball . . keep it coming," the Landing Signal Officer replied from his platform on the flight deck's port side.

Hmmmm. This fellow's voice is significantly tense compared to the LSO who' been " waving " our graduating class each night for the past several weeks at our land-based practice runway.

My classmates and I had received more than two years of flight training at five bases in four states were . . but everything was now riding on not failing in our performance during this evening's flying events . . on the actual carrier.'

It was the long-awaited "graduation exercise" into the fleet . . and tonight was the final ' rite of passage ' into the Navy's elite fraternity of pilots landing using tail hooks.

In a few short months, I'd be flying combat in South-East Asia from a carrier in the Gulf of Tonkin.

Scheduling such a significant event at the end of a grueling 16-hour day . . should have raised a yellow caution flag somewhere in headquarters.

But a yellow flag particularly raised . . in my brain.

The instructor pilots had primed the class for months with sea stories about night landings on a carrier at sea . . separated " the men from the boys". Now it was my time to prove that I could ' hack it ' with the vaunted eagles.

The adrenaline was pumpin.'

The non-stop day that began with a 0330 wake-up call had been an endurance test. But long days are part of the normal routine aboard aircraft carriers at sea. In addition, we were preparing for combat. And to be able to " hack the Navy's program" was an integral factor in training for air combat.

This was U.S. Navy . . not the airline business. And our training squadron's key mission was to ' pump out ' qualified combat replacement pilots for Nav/Air/Pac to man their light-attack jet fighter Corsairs.

They were running way behind schedule.

Pressure was on from the top down . . to hurry up . . and catch up. This pressure was backed up by the unwritten code within in the community of light-attack fighter pilots was . . ' death before dishonor. '

To be caught ' begging off the flight schedule,' with a flimsy excuse like fatigue, was a sure way to branded . . as " not able to hack it. " And . . until the fighter aircraft became incredibly more expensive . . a pilot's life . . was cheap indeed.

The final half-mile up to the ship was over in a handful seconds. Happening so fast that the tricky " burble " of turbulent air above the carrier's fantail . . passed practically unnoticed.

The bone-jarring jolt of the 25,000 pound Corsair coming down at 650 feet-per-minute to collide with the ship's steel deck never went unnoticed.

The harness straps dug deeply into my shoulders as the plane decelerated from 135 knots to a halt in three seconds. The first " night trap" had lived up to ' scuttlebutt ' as . . ' betwixt ecstasy - and a head-on wreck with a train.

" Five more and you are going to the fleet." That first night landing was on speed . . on glideslope . . the tail hook captured and held onto the targeted # 3 wire.

B-U-T . . I'd let personal fatigue mess me up . . nano-seconds ago.

I had not maintained CENTER LINE AWARENESS !

The plane instantly settled into a pilot error-induced drift toward the deck's port edge. Why ? It might have been because I was : [1] fifth man up, [2] third launch and [3] eighth trap of an [4] extended day.

And fatigue had finally over-powered the late night adrenaline . . and I'd ' fast slumped ' my personal cockpit awareness.

I had become fixated on ' flying the ball . . and momentarily allowed my alignment with the FLIGHT DECK's CENTER-LINE . . to fall out of my visual scan.

Too late . . I stomped on a corrective rudder. But the tail hook rapidly slid sideways [right to left] down the # 3 arresting wire . . as it stopped the landing roll out.

Responding to the urgent late rudder . . like a tight rope walker . . the Corsair skirted the port edge of the flight deck . . before its left main tire halted ' eye-poppingly ' closeto the port edge of the flight deck.

Now helpless . . and hugely at risk . . I could hardly believe this was ' going on'.

A moment later, the cockpit jolted hard . . as the left main landing gear slid side-ways over . . the deck's edge.

Unlucky for me, the protective steel scupper plate [guarding the deck edge] had been ' taken off ' . . then never replaced during the carrier's hurried maintenance at the shipyard.

In less than a heartbeat, the fighter plane was perched . . at an obscene angle . . on the unforgiving flight deck's unprotected edge.

With no visible horizon, it was hard to tell the plane's exact position . . as it balanced up there.

But with no scupper plate . . the fuselage had rotated at least 60 degrees left-wing-down. And to ' punch out ' now would be suicidal. The ejection seat's trajectory would send the seat skipping across
the water like a flat rock thrown on the surface of a pond.

If the tail hook remained engaged with the arresting gear cable, the situation might still be salvageable. As my mind suddenly shifted into slow motion, the magnitude of the moment settled in. Strangely enough, there was no panic. At least not yet.

My thoughts were surprisingly calm and clear as I instinctively pulled the throttle aft and "around-the-horn" to shut-down the engine.

As the engine spooled down through 65% RPM . . the generator dropped off . . deleting all electrical power.

As the radio and interior lights clicked off . . total darkness instantly enveloped the cockpit.

All contact with the world outside was lost. Except for the pounding in my chest . . there was only absolute silence. If this was a dream, it was a nightmare !

Unfortunately . . I was not dreaming. The momentary stillness was soon shattered as the aircraft lunged forward. Then down.

The worst had happened.

The Corsair's tail hook had "spit-out" its arresting cable. The plane tumbled off the flight deck's side and plunged downward some 60 feet . . before smacking the water below . . it was like falling into a black on black hole.

We had learned that a ditched aircraft normally sinks at about 10 feet per sec. And after 10-12 seconds, pilot survival . . is highly unlikely.

If I were going to get out of this mess alive, I figured I had about 10 seconds to do it. Using the ejection seat seemed to be my only chance . . a slim one. Only a handful of pilots had ever attempted . . much less survived . . using their ejection seat under the water's surface.

There was also the chance I might eject myself directly into the ship's passing steel hull. Or even worse - into the wide path of the carrier's massive screws.

I intentionally allowed the ship to pass . . clear.

Then, like a death-row prisoner condemned to throw the switch on his own life, I carefully reached down between my knees for the alternate ejection handle . . the one we'd trained to use . . if seconds were absolutely crucial.

Images of my wife and baby flashed through my mind. How would she react when the skipper and chaplain came to the door?

Realizing this might be my last conscious thought, I grasped the ejection handle, closed my eyes and, expecting the worst, I pulled straight up. Nothing happened. I decided the ejection seat was not going to work. And I could visualize my mouth and lungs . . compelled to ' suck in ' the black water . . when a sudden blast of brilliant light blinded me.

Following its built-in delay . . the ejection seat's rocket motor . . now ignited.

In an instant, I was out of the cockpit and clear of the seat. But I was pushed way down deep into a pool of jet-black ink. My oxygen mask was forced down around my chin. Couldn't breathe.

And I was totally disorientated. All was black.

Which way was UP . . to a next breath ?

And for the first time panic surged into my brain. But I blocked it. Then I blocked it again. Now I desperately needed to think !

In less than one minute, I had gone from being a cocky, self-assured carrier pilot to a desperate young 25 year-old Navy LT junior grade fighting for his life. I had to come up with something fast . . or it was all over.

Magically, a cluster of lights flickering above me, caught my eye. Because the 80,000 ton aircraft carrier moving at 30 knots could not make it back . . with full rudder . . and reverse screws . . for several miles.

But the experienced flight-deck directors had tossed their floatable, lighted flashlight wands over the side to mark my location for the plane-guard destroyer and the rescue helicopter.

And they didn't yet realize . . they'd also gifted me . . a life-saving assist.

The lights reoriented me . . in my underwater grave. And instinctively I swam toward . . light and

AIR !

As my helmet broke the surface I gasped for air. It felt great to be alive. But that lung full of fresh sea air was accompanied by an excruciating pain as if a butcher knife had been plunged and twisted between my shoulder blades. Something was seriously wrong with my body. But I now had an even more pressing problem.

My parachute's altitude-sensing device had activated and the parachute had partially opened. The canopy and its nylon shroud lines streaming behind me, and about to over-power my frantic efforts to keep my head above water.

I grabbed for the nylon toggles that inflate the lobes on the water survival vest, but they weren't where they should have been. Panic began to click in once again . . time was running out. And I was fast losing the struggle to keep my head above water. It took all the strength I could muster just to . . . stay afloat.

The parachute was winning. And I was on the verge of being forced to gulp in water.

My body suddenly went numb with apprehension as something below the surface brushed against my feet. During the ejection through the plastic canopy, my left fore-arm had been sliced open and it was bleeding profusely. The survival vest contained shark repellent.

But drowning was by far . . the greater fear.

When the object brushed against me again, I realized that it was my plane. Impacting the water with minimal force . . it was virtually intact. And with its wing fuel cells filled with mostly air, it was floating upside down just beneath the surface.

I got a hand hold on the aircraft . . and I located the life vest's inflation toggles . . wrenched elsewhere during the underwater ejection. Grasping a lanyard in each hand . . and whoosh . . whoosh . . the flotation lobes puffed up instantly.

I glanced around just in time to see the plane-guard destroyer bearing down on me.

From my water-level perspective, ' small boy ' looked anything but small. And if she didn't change course, this rescue would be over. But instantly yielding to the rescue helicopter, the destroyer quickly altered its course.

Thank you . . ' helicopter bubba.'

I rolled over on my back and reached down the risers until I felt the Koch releases connecting me to the chute. I lifted the protective covers . . pinched exposed springs . . and the streaming parachute vanished.

Moments later, I was center stage in the wide beam of bright light shining down from the helicopter hovering noisily overhead. I had never fully appreciated helicopters except when they brought the mail. And they earlier been on my list of low-priority aircraft.

Never again !

Just now, that homely, wind-blowing, water-churning contraption looked terrific. Absolutely nothin ' could have been more gorgeous.

Minutes later, a rescue swimmer from the helicopter was in the water next to me. " You okay, sir? " he yelled over the din of the thrashing rotor blades. " I'm okay," I yelled back.

" But it hurts to breathe."

" All we've got is a horse collar, but it'll get you out of here," he shouted as he guided my arms through the opening in the pear-shaped rescue sling that nestled under my armpits.

As the hoist began lifting us slowly out of the water, my body dangled helplessly from the horse collar. Weighted down by soaking flight gear and steel-toed flight boots . . and whipped around by the helo's down-draft - back pain became incredibly intense.

The next thing I remember was sprawling on the deck of the helo's cargo cabin and vomiting out sea water.

Moments later, the helo recovered aboard the carrier and I was taken to sickbay on a stretcher. The alternate ejection seat handle expedited my exit from the cockpit. But at a painful price.

My reaching down between my knees to grasp the secondary handle in the inverted, submerged cockpit . . placed my spine in a dangerously curved position . . for that unforgiving underwater kick in the butt.'

The brutal G-force . . had busted my spine.

Three days after the mishap, the ship's medical officer arranged to accompany me ashore on a MedEvac flight to nearby San Diego. By coincidence, the flight was scheduled with the same helio-copter crew, and aboard the same heliocopter that had rescued me earlier.

Just prior to boarding, a casualty on the flight deck had created an unexpected dilemma, because the helo was configured to carry only one patient. Needless to say, I wasn't happy to learn my name

was scratched from the helicopter's manifest only moments before its launch.

About an hour later, an out of breath young corpsman came running onto the ward. From the look on his face, I knew something terrible had happened.

The corpsman blurted out, " You're either living right or " somebody's looking after you", Lieutenant. That helo had engine problems. It went down in the water about halfway to the beach. Another helo found the wreckage right away. But there were no survivors."

I respectfully declined a 2nd opportunity to Med/Evac ashore, electing instead to ride the carrier back into port.

In three short days, I had cheated death twice. Also learning . . the thrill of flying jet aircraft off carrier decks sometimes demands a high personal price.

Whether my survival was sheer good luck is debatable. Maybe the corpsman was right - maybe some-one' was looking after me.

Every single day, since 10 June 1969 . . has as been a gift.

CDR. Russ Pearson, USN (Ret.)

Hook magazine [abridged]