

*At 130 knots on night takeoff . . . I eased the stick forward to keep the Crusader's nose from climbing more than 7-8 degrees . . . when the entire aircraft instantly began . . . wild buffeting . . . on its own.*

*What's the hell  
. . . is WRONG ?*

*Maybe I'll have to ' punch out ' . . . hope that damn Martin Baker [ ejection seat ] doesn't bust my back.*

*Just 100 feet in the air . . . with University City street lights ahead . . . along with its family-filled homes.*

*I needed to move further right !*

*I inputed right wing aileron.*

*But the airplane did **NOT** like that . . .*

*And made an instant . . . aerobatic half-snap roll to the inverted.*

*Now I'm upside down . . . much . . . too low . . . to ' punch out. '*

*I finessed in some ' intuitive ' opposite aileron . . . and opposite rudder.*

*It was the right idea . . . but I'd badly ' over-shot ' the attempted recovery.*

*After weird oscillations it ' finally settled down . . . into a semblance of control.*

*I clicked the mike : " **Miramar Tower . . . NJ207 with serious control problems. I may have to ' punch out of here ! '***

*I was surprised how cool I sounded . . . considering the totally unexpected aerobatics . . . seconds before.*

*The Tower's response . . . was like someone had taken an ice pick . . . and stabbed me in the chest.*

***” ROGER . . .***

***BUT Sir,***

***BOTH your Crusader's wings***

ARE STILL

**FOLDED!**

” My W-H-A-T is **W-H-A-T ?** ”

*There went all my cool and calm. And there went the radio discipline . . . out the window - no call sign - no addressee. It had*

*been replaced by terror's edge.*

*I glanced into the Crusader's rear view mirrors only to momentarily stare at the wing tip position lights sticking straight up into the*

*air. They must have folded up during take-off roll.*

*I ALWAYS unfold the wings before take-off !*

*By now I doing 180 knots, and easing off power. But nothing felt right. And the plane was still buffeting badly. I reached back*

*to check the position of the wing fold control handle. Instead of being stowed flat, the handle was sticking straight up ! To no one,*

*I yelled an expletive.*

*Again, I glanced into the rear view mirrors. The wing tip position lights were actually canted inward above the remaining wing*

*stubs ! Airloads had failed the wing fold mechanism to allow the outer wing halves to almost lay down on top of the fixed wing stubs.*

*The Crusader had a 35 ft. wing span. But I had a combined total of [ 12 ] twelve feet of wing tip sticking straight up in the air from their mid-wing stubs.*

*I finally eased right to avoid University City. By using a cross-controlled rudder and less aileron . . managed not to exceed*

*45 degrees of bank.*

*I clearly recalled a flying safety article describing another pilot's similar screw-up. Although fear was really pumping my adren-*

*aline , I was able to recall it almost word for word. And the pilot's bottom line was : DO NOT attempt to fold down the Crus-*

*ader's wings . . while its flying.*

*Now I'm a 100 feet up and airborne . . University City's densely close together family-filled houses . . straight ahead . . I*

*needed to get further right !*

*So I stuck in the right aileron.*

*Airplane didn't like that . .*

*Did a half-snap roll.*

*About that time, George came up on Tower frequency, and asked : " Ron. This is George. How are you doing ? " My answer*

*was short and sweet, " It's still flying." And we went on to discuss a necessarily higher traffic pattern speed in knots . . 180K*

*on approach . . then about 170K all the way down to the runway's surface . . and 160K at touchdown.*

*But everything depended on . . . if the airplane continued to be [ more or less ] under control.*

*We discussed lowering the landing hook due to a much higher final approach speed . . . and possible lost hydraulics [ including the brakes ] and twisted wing fold area.*

*If I didn't put the hook down, the barrier failed me, allowing me to roll off the runway's far edge, I wasn't going to look*

*good in the head work department.  
I put down the Crusader's landing hook.*

*While bleeding off excess speed. . . strongly focused on the Crusader's altered flying characteristics. I determined . . . if I had*

*to eject . . . I would definitely have an upright aircraft punching out. At landing pattern altitude, I could very easily strike the ground*

*before seat separation and chute opening.*

*Pucker factor was still pretty high.*

*The Crusader had an especially long fuselage; that was the reason its entire wing was designed to pivot up allowing the aircraft*

*to be additionally parallel to the ground for landing.*

*Because the outer wing tip stubs were folded straight up . . . the remaining fuselage attached wings were absented huge lift.*

*Combined with the Crusader's unusually long fuselage problem, I thought there was nasty chance I would hit the runway tail*

*section first . . . because of the starkly fore-shortened wings.*

*Adding lots of extra power . . . just prior to touchdown . . . I deliberately eased the fuselage additionally parallel to the runway . . .*

*to reduce the chance of [ big time ] crumpling its tail.*

*That ' test pilot-ish ' thinking worked like magic ! As the hook clicked into the runway's arresting gear . . bringing the Crusader*

*to an halt.*

*Logged flight time was seven [ 7 ] extremely long minutes in the dark [ over the heads of many cozy TV watching families.]*

*After the hook was disengaged, I taxied to the parking ramp . . where all unoccupied personnel were watching to find out if*

*the Crusader's wings had folded by freak accident.*

*Or if I'd screwed up.*

*Most of faces out there seemed to be read : " Man . . I'm sure glad it wasn't me . . this ' wings up ' pilot error happened to. "*

*The O.D. told me that he'd notified the Commanding Officer, CDR. Paul Gilchrist and that he wanted me to call him. Immediately.*

*I felt betrayed and scared. I'd known he would find out; hell, the Skipper found out everything ! That was part of his job. But*

*this soon, I was not at all prepared to discuss it.*

*I dialed the Skipper's number and he picked up on the first ring. " Skipper, this is Ron Lambe." He asked quickly and calmly, "*

*Are you all right ? And how is my airplane ? "*

*" Well Sir, the piano hinge on the top of the wing fold is bent . . and the wing fold mechanism is broken.*

*Otherwise, she looks O.K."*

*The Skipper surprised me asking me to call my wife saying I was through flying for the night and on my way home. The purpose*

*of the call was to preempt any of the news media calling her for the story.*

*[ Man, this guy was sharp; I wouldn't have thought of that.]*

*Then he said, " Ron, I'm glad you are alright. You just go home and get some sleep. We'll talk about this in the morning. Be in*

*my office at 0800."*

*Although it was o'dark thirty in the morning when I arrived home, I told my wife everything. And as all good Navy wives do,*

*she sympathetically listened. Sleep finally rescued me . . although I stared at the ceiling until about 0400.*

*Morning came quickly. I certainly didn't want to be late ! . .*

*I knocked on the Skipper's door promptly at 0800, then marched in smartly and stood at attention saying :*

*" LT. JG Lambe reporting as ordered, sir. "*

*Get any sleep ? " No Sir.*

*" You want to tell me how this happened ? " He listened intently to every word, then asked, ' Learn anything ?' " Yes, Sir.*

*Never take off without actually reading . . out loud . . the entire take-off Checklist."*

*" Ron, you have learned a very valuable lesson that will serve you well in the future. You really got out cheap. And I'm really*

*glad you're O.K. See if the O.D. can spare an aircraft for you to fly."*

*Dumbfounded . . . I said : " YES SIR ! " as I saluted sharply and marched out of his office.*

*CDR Gilchrist turned out to be the best Skipper I'd had in the Navy. A few years later he was deservedly promoted to Admiral.*

*I don't believe his intuitive quality of leadership can be taught.*



This Crusader with folded wings [ flying with folded wings above ] was photographed by Marine Sgt. George Lord of VMF235.

It all ended after about 25 minutes of flight time when the plane was driven safely into the arresting gear with the wings

still folded and both standing up in the barrier [ like soldiers at full attention.] Hundreds of hours of structural repair was re-

quired in the Death Angel Metal Shop before Crusader was once again flyable.

There was another ' successful ' flight in the F8E with the wings folded in the same Death Angel Squadron within a year. It as a combat flight at night in the rain.

The Crusader pilot had taxi temporarily folded up his wings to maneuver around a Pan Am 707 before pulling out on the active runway.

Then he absolutely forgot to lock the F-8's wings back in place before taking off.

In opaque rain he probably set the night take-off speed record a Crusader with straight up wings. After finally jerking it into

the air just before entering Da Nang's perimeter defensive minefield . . instantly entering a surreal world of flashing green and red

wing tip lights . . and multiple orange lights blinking with the slightest movement of the Crusader's outboard wing panels.

Immediately when airborne . . the pilot instantly yanked up the landing gear . . still had no idea what was wrong . . turned 180

degrees downwind in the landing pattern . . while calling in the emergency.

With an insane world of flashing yellow and red lights, warning horns, pitch black night, rain [ soiled underwear ] the pilot forgot

to rotate his wheels back down . . also forgetting there were two . . one thousand pound bombs . . between the Crusader's belly and the runway.

The deeply alarmed ' dead man ' . . smacked down hard on . . both bombs . . with a mighty . .

" Whump ! "

But nothing ' blew up ' . . except later when his Commanding Officer . . found out what the man had done to one of his combat precious Crusaders.

The pilot was medivaced to advanced medical facility with a fractured vertebrae . . but not exactly with an aviation hero's departure out of Da Nang Air Base.

Sources : vetted various [ abridged ]