

Scar

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February in Florida, and Al and I sit on our parachutes in raunchy flight suits, sweat-dampened backs against the wooden shack, watching the hogs grunt and squeal on the pierced steel plank. We watch them line up one by one at the edge of the pancake-shaped pad and explode in a cloud of oil smoke and hot piston noise. The pattern is flown at two hundred feet, so the parachutes are a joke.

The shack we lean against is linked to N.A.S. Pensacola by a grease-smudged phone and a radio that sometimes works, and the pad is Bloody Baron, an oversized garbage can lid of asphalt and pierced-steel plank dropped flat in the pine woods of west Florida. It's an auxiliary to Pensacola where midshipmen, replacing cadets in the post-war navy, and ensigns just out of Annapolis slam Corsairs and Bearcats into the asphalt the way they'll slam them onto the carrier in a couple of weeks. The only differences are the absence of arresting cables and the stiff wind that will be down the deck of the ship, and those differences have given Bloody Baron its name. It's a little more than a carrier length across, and the shack sits to one side like an island. If you're going to screw up, they figure better here than on the ship. With the pad round, you always land into the wind, any that gets through those tight-packed pines. Today it's Corsairs.

They're ugly on the pierced-steel plank—squat, mean-looking hogs. With the large-eared cowl flaps full open they look more like prehistoric lizards, and the metal around the big radials is stained like the hull of a tramp steamer. But once in the air and cleaned up, they take on a look of function and the mean turns to deadly grace. Whistling death, the Japs had called them. The

props are so large they put that bend in the wings to get them up off the ground. Al and I had asked for them.

It had been a long day. They had flown out only four Corsairs that morning, and there were still a lot of us sitting around waiting for the half hour and six or seven circuits we'd make. We were getting used to that after almost two years in a program that was supposed to have had us qualified and out in the fleet for the past six months. Pools had built everywhere we went, the flow of midshipmen backing up at every stage and equipment breaking down too often. Most of the birds had seen hard combat in the Pacific, and on some you could see beneath the canopy rail the painted-over meatballs. It wasn't rare to have a main wing spar give way on a hard landing and that was the only kind we knew. The way it was going we'd have ensigns' boards before wings, and that wasn't the way it was meant to go.

I knew Bloody Baron from before, when I was getting ready for the carrier in basic trainers. That had been a year earlier and before the navy ran out of money, before the program bogged down. But even then we should have seen it coming. They sent us all home on leave from Saufley Field until they could get more money for aviation fuel. It seemed a gift at the time. It only took eight hours to get home on a bus, less than that for Al; he lived in the slash pine end of Mississippi.

I knew Baron from the front seat of an SNJ, and that time there was an instructor in back. He'd told me that next time out I'd do it alone. We sat idling at the edge of the pad, waiting for a slot between the bouncing Bearcats so we could get back to mainside. I was looking at the one on downwind, cocked up and looking slow. Then suddenly he was below the line of tree tops. I watched, unbelieving, as chunks of trees spit into the air, like grass from a giant mower, and saw through the trees the bright flash of his hitting. I felt the rudder move, and the throttle tore from my hand. The instructor gunned the trainer across the mat, almost against the chain link fence at the edge.

"You got it!" he yelled and scrambled down the wing.

I watched him climb over the fence and run into the trees. From where I sat, I could see the canopy of the F-8, always pulled back in carrier landings, and through the billowing smoke a ghostly figure stood in the cockpit then toppled toward the ground. I heard the wail of the crash truck, saw it skid to a stop at the chain

link gate, watched, sick in the gut, as the man in rubber boots and rescue gear struggled with the padlocked chain that held it closed. Time froze like it later did over Beeville, and that's when my mind took the picture. It all stops in that instant, and nothing moves. It's one of those times you can go through life without knowing. It's like a truth, a sour wisdom that changes you, and you're never the same as those it never happened to. The man is dead. All previous knowledge, the fire, the thing in your gut supports that. It's a given: he's gone. And it all happens instantly. He'd be young and clean-looking and probably a fair jock, and he'd be gone. Your mind takes the picture.

Then others were climbing the fence, and through the haze of smoke I saw men struggling out of the trees, one of them my instructor; they were bracing another between them. The gate was somehow opened and they brought him around to it. I taxied along the fence until I could see the pilot's face. I knew him. Beneath the blackened mask I knew who he was, and I knew he had a kind of luck not many have. He might never shave the same again but the trees had cushioned him, and he'd gone in right side up.

There is still a burned-out spot in those trees, a scar. You can see it while flying your pattern or from the chain link fence. I had walked over there and looked, the first day back from Corpus Christi. That was the week before.

Those fire-scarred trunks of trees had made me wonder again about luck and the kind that midshipman had, and I thought about others since in other places who hadn't had it. There was Jerry Lear at Cabannis Field in Texas. A schedule change had kept him from going to Mexico with us one weekend, and he'd given me money to buy some leather stuff for his sister's birthday. Jerry was in an F-8, too. And Ron Gillette, in a routine landing at Correy Field, torched a row of parked Corsairs and his own a week after his bride came down to Florida. And there were the two in my flight over Beeville, Texas. I had pushed that picture away for a long time, but looking through the fence it broke through raw and open, like a cut.

Besides Al and me, there had been four others in the flight that day, split into sections of three. My section had bounced at Beeville auxiliary and were circling above, smoking cigarettes and listening to Texas shit-kick on the radio. The instructor was in the

mobile below, critiquing the others. When he radioed the lower section to join up, mine began closing on me and I banked into a wide circle for the join-up.

Then something happened. I was looking left, watching the instructor's Corsair climb up so I could join on him. From the corner of my eye I caught a flutter. I snapped my head right to see my wingman jerk up and out of echelon. Before I knew what had spooked him, I see the Corsair to his right float up in slow motion, then the one climbing up from below, rising almost as slowly and head-on into him, never seeing. I see the two lock like freight trains, rearing back on their tails, strobes of sunlight as a prop flashed off into the sun an instant before the fusing of metal and plexiglass.

There is shouting in my headphones to bail out. I move my hands and feet to keep the tumbling ball in sight and spiral down with it, toward the sun-scorched Texas fields. Like waking from a nightmare, I snap alive and level off above the rolling hills. The ball is there in a black scorched hole with metal raining down and the dry grass on fire at the edge, and I am pulled tight in around it and the voice still shrilling in my ears is mine.

"Smoke 1, come back up!" I hear through my shouts. I know that only seconds have passed. The edged voice of the instructor cuts through. "Count off, Smoke!"

"Smoke 1," I shouted and stared into the glazed sky above for the others. I waited to hear 5; Al had been 5 that day.

Three didn't count off, but Al did and all the others except 4. Mattley and Bergeron. We'd played poker the night before, and I'd admired the Frenchman's hands when he dealt the cards.

They gave us a new instructor after that, a marine captain, and two ensigns to fill out the flight. The first thing the marine did was take us up to Beeville, then down on the deck in trail, over the black hole in that field. I knew what he was doing and that it was the right thing to do.

Then just before leaving Texas there was Bill Bolton, and that was the worst. I had ridden on a train with his casket to Baton Rouge and met his folks.

I look over at Al, leaning against the shack, smoking a cigarette and lost in something he's thinking about. He thinks a lot. Reads, too. He says the atomic bomb changed everything, and the navy

is in real trouble if the politicians don't get their shit together. The Secretary of Defense thinks carriers are obsolete and all the money should go toward building B-36s.

"It don't look good for the navy," Al said on the bus coming out that morning, then told me about some trouble in Korea. I don't know where he gets it all. I've come to know him well over the past year, and he is changing. But so am I.

Al gets a bird, and I climb up on the wing and help him strap in. With my back against the shack, I watch his patterns through a cut and a wave-off. There are a lot of wave-offs, and I wonder about the landing signal officer, the j.g. with the paddles. Then it's my turn. I climb up the oil streaked wing, the engine belching and the big prop idling, and help the midshipman out of his straps. I jerk a quick look at the fuel gauge and check that the brake is set. He helps me strap in and jumps down off the wing. It's getting late, the sun is slicing in through the tops of trees when I line up to go.

Twenty minutes later I finish my landing checklist for the third time and look down to my left to mark the L.S.O. with the paddles. He's waved me off twice, too fast the first time, then too high. The long nose is reared up now, the flaps full down and the airspeed just above stalling. I let the nose fall into the left turn, then hold it, keeping the bright flutter of the paddles against the edge of the cowl, playing the turn. Some days it feels like you're on rails and you know it's right, but today the airspeed drops and I bring in some power, keeping the paddles against the mark I've set on the cowling. The paddles go low and I nudge the power up, still turning, almost there, until the paddles are nearly level. Then in that instant when I should level the wings, cut the throttle, and pop the nose down—hauling it up just before I hit—I get flashing paddles, the frantic wave-off.

No time to wonder, no time to think, just slam it to the wall and muscle the stick forward and right with all the top rudder I can get. From the tail of my eye I see paddles fly into the air, and I know I'm in trouble. The bottom is falling out of my airplane, and I hang in a stall at fifty feet with two thousand horses behind that big prop, and it packing the air so solid the airframe is rotating instead. I see in stop frame a windshield full of revolving chain link fence and pine trees laid on their sides. In that instant, all the buried thoughts of crashing and burning, all the drummed-

in drills of mandatory wave-offs, flashed by. In that fast-time instant of hyper awareness, I stand on the bottom rudder with all the strength in my leg and will the prop wash to work on it. I stand on it until the nose starts to drop, the left wingtip straight at the ground but coming up. The screaming engine goes slack when I haul the throttle back.

The Corsair hardly rolls when it hits the ground. The left wingtip has kissed the pierced plank, and the bird bounces level on the main gear, all forward motion bled off. It stops at the edge of the pad and I pull the throttle to idle cut-off. I sit, watching them run across the oily steel. But I don't hear what they're saying; I'm looking for someone.

"Where's the L.S.O.?" I ask the first face up on the wing.

"In the shack."

"Is he OK?"

The face nods, and I unstrap and climb down off the bird. When I walk through the door of the shack, the j.g. is on the phone. He doesn't know who I am. When I hit him, the phone flies the way of the paddles, and he backpedals across the floor and sits down against the wall. I feel hands on me, then, and people are shouting at me; I begin to tremble.

On the bus ride back to Pensacola, I sit alone. There is none of the usual grab-ass, and the talk is hushed, none of it meant for me. It's dusk, and I look out the window at the pines on the side of the road. Al has flown a bird back to Pensacola, but I know he's gotten the word on the radio. I wonder what he's thinking.

I'm not much worried about the wingtip, or even hitting the L.S.O. He'd gotten up by the time they cooled me down. But aborting a wave-off is something else, even if there wasn't any alternative. The L.S.O. is never wrong, and I guess it has to be that way if you are going to fly off carriers. I'll have trouble with the accident review board: If I lie and tell them the engine stalled, I could well be exonerated; yet when I tell them the truth, that it wasn't possible to take a wave-off at that instant, and blame the L.S.O., I will in their eyes be wrong. And of course they won't give much weight to the time I lost in the bird when I took Bill Bolton home. I feel relieved and somehow it doesn't matter.

I walked over to the fence before I got on the bus and stood

with my fingers hooked in the wire and looked for a while at that fire-scarred spot. I'd had some luck myself. Maybe more than I knew.□