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Ejection date: 19 December 1981

Aircraft: F-14A Tomcat, US Navy

On 19 December 1981, the aircraft carrier *USS Constellation (CV-64)* was near the middle of the Indian Ocean, 150 miles northeast of the island of Diego Garcia. We'd left our home port of San Diego two months prior, and had settled in for a 7½-month deployment. We weren't involved in any active conflicts, but the flying was still exciting, especially for me since I'd joined the squadron just a few months earlier and this was my first extended deployment. I was an F-14 Tomcat radar intercept officer (RIO) in Fighter Squadron 24 (VF-24), the Fighting Renegades.

I wasn't scheduled to fly that day, only to brief at 1:15 PM as a spare. We manned spares in case an aircraft broke during startup, so a replacement was ready to go.

Just as the brief started, the pilot who was supposed to lead our flight launched as a spare for the event before us. Scheduling like this was a gamble but helped preserve crew day. When the squadron duty officer looked for a replacement pilot, he saw that our commanding officer, Skipper Switzer was available. When the skipper arrived at the ready room he chose to fly with his regular RIO – me. It wasn't a big deal, last minute substitutions happened all the time.

It was a training flight, a series of 2v2 radar intercepts, our Tomcats against A-7 Corsair IIs. The goal was to concentrate on the radar intercept portion and then, at each merge, have short, easy engagements that were likely to be fun as well as good training. A-7s were tactical fighter-bombers and their pilots always enjoyed mixing it up.

Skipper Switzer and I manned Renegade 205, launched at 3 PM, and expected to be back in time for dinner. It was another perfect tropical day with a few small clouds. Repetitious but remarkably beautiful. I enjoyed the controlled challenge of the 2v2 and the flight went well.

Two hours after launch we were flying circles in low holding, watching the next event launch from the flight deck 2,000 feet below, with our squadronmate on our wing. As the last aircraft moved to the catapult, Skipper Switzer steadied up and flew aft of the carrier to begin our day visual approach. We swept our wings back, descended, made a left turn, and passed over the ship at 600 feet and 500 knots. Overhead the carrier, the skipper pulled into a break turn for downwind.

Left break turn, throttles reduced to idle, wing-sweep mode to auto, and the other items on the landing checklist – as I had done seventy-nine times before. We completed the checklist, turned aft of the carrier, and got ready for another landing. I noticed the time was 5:15 PM as we made visual contact

with the ball that would guide the skipper through the final approach. It was almost dinnertime and I thought about having a slider tonight, and then we slammed onto the flight deck.

My next conscious thought, a fraction of a second later, was that something was wrong. I should have been thrown forward into my shoulder straps by the sudden deceleration of the trap, but after a brief jolt I was sitting upright.

Many people who have been involved in a fender bender have experienced time distortion – each sliver of time contains many thoughts, many perceptions, but the body seems sluggish. I watched *Constellation's* island, the towering structure that holds the ship's bridge, sweep by as we rolled through the landing area past other aircraft. I heard the rumble of the deck plates beneath our wheels, and a second of silence passed over the ICS while both of us processed the situation. Without consciously moving them, I realized that my hands were on the lower ejection handle on the front of the seat. I knew instinctively that if I pulled that handle there would be no turning back—our seats would rocket us out of the plane.

We rolled along the deck. There was some resistance slowing us down, but nowhere near enough to bring Renegade 205 to a stop. In a normal trap, the arresting wire plays out under tension and the rollout of several hundred feet of cable takes about two seconds. For those seconds my brain was registering that there was still a chance we would come to a stop. Then there was one last feeble tug but we continued rolling toward the end of the landing area. We were traveling about 50 knots—too fast to stop, too slow to fly.

Skipper Switzer called, “Eject! Eject!” His voice had taken on a new urgency, almost impatience – *What are you waiting for?* His hand was on the stick, still trying to fly, so it was my job to pull the handle that would eject both of us.

I reacted on his first syllable, yanking the yellow-and-black striped ejection handle. Once I pulled the handle, everything that followed was automatic.

I immediately saw gray smoke in the cockpit and knew this indicated ignition of the detonating cord that ran around the canopy seal. The explosive cord destroyed the powerful latches securing the canopy to the aircraft, and a very fast heartbeat later I felt a rush of wind as the metal-framed Plexiglas canopy flew free.

My Martin-Baker GRU-7A ejection seat was in charge now, and it started running through its programming, doing some very smart things. When the ejection sequence control mechanism determined the canopy had cleared the aircraft, the rocket in my seat fired. I instantaneously experienced an acceleration force of about 20 g – outside the recommended operating range of the human brain – and blacked out for a few seconds.

My next conscious thought was profoundly confused. I needed to know how old I was. My brain was rebooting, and this seemed to be a crucial index, the progress bar of my consciousness being

reassembled. In a few more fractions of a second I remembered that I had ejected from an F-14, and then suddenly I was back in real time. I could hear the wind and feel myself flying through the air.

What the landing signal officers watching events from the flight deck saw was Renegade 205 disappear over the edge of the deck and then me, a moment later, ride my seat to roughly the height of the tailfins of planes parked along the flight deck. This meant I started descending, unconscious and with an unopened parachute, from about sixteen feet above the steel surface. I owe my life to the fact that our jet tilted to the left as it slipped over the edge, otherwise I would have free-fallen to the deck rather than splashing into the ocean.

The seat sensed this was a low-altitude ejection and went through its sequence quickly. It severed the straps that held me in place, and I felt myself being separated from the seat cushions. At the same instant, my parachute deployed and blossomed, and I felt a jerk as the nylon lines and harness attaching me to the chute took tension. I opened my eyes just in time to splash into the water.

To prevent pilot-RIO collisions during ejection, the rocket in the pilot's seat fired four-tenths of a second after the RIO's. This was enough time for Skipper Switzer to become impatient, and he reached for the ejection handle mounted on his headrest just as the automatic sequence I had set in motion launched his seat, an instant before 205 hit the water. The Tomcat had tilted more left-wing-down, so Commander Switzer was rocketed almost horizontally. The landing signal officers said he skipped several times across the surface of the ocean as he was flung away from the carrier, giving a new significance to the term "Skipper."

I splashed into the water and had been submerged for only a fraction of a second when a device, activated by salt water, fired and inflated my life vest. I bobbed to the surface aware and alert. With my head above water, I unclipped my oxygen mask. The time dilation effect had passed, and sounds and sensations came through in real time.

Only a few seconds ago I had been sitting in the cockpit of a Tomcat landing on a flight deck, but now I was bobbing in the Indian Ocean. It was daytime. The water was warm, about 85 degrees. I had landed just a few feet from the nose of Renegade 205, which I was amazed to discover was also floating. This unfamiliar view of a Tomcat took me a moment to process. The missing canopy gave the sleek plane a broken profile, and the twin tails rose above the surface of the ocean like gigantic fins.

A few feet beyond 205, just a hundred feet from me, the *Constellation* skimmed past at 20 knots. My gaze ran up the huge, gray slabs of her curved hull and I saw dozens of people looking down at me from the edge of the flight deck, six stories above. I could see their helmeted heads and goggled faces and I gave them a thumbs-up to make clear I was feeling good under the circumstances. Then I decided to get back to my own job.

Time in the water at this point, less than twenty seconds.

My primary task now was to detach myself from my parachute. From training I knew that a parachute does not float on the surface like a film of silk, but instead fills with water and sinks. An aviator could

soon find himself attached to a bag of water weighing thousands of pounds that will drag him under despite the best flotation vest. I had read reports of aviators who ejected successfully only to meet tragic ends this way, and I had been put through training several times that included actually detaching from a parachute in the water.

I flung off my wet gloves with a flick of each wrist and released the fittings of my parachute harness, but discovered a new challenge: I was surrounded by my parachute, tangled in its tough nylon lines. Moving in the water only entangled me more deeply. Not a problem, I had trained for this, too. Bobbing on the large swells spawned by the carrier, I calmly paddled backwards away from the chute. After only a few strokes, I could tell this procedure wasn't working like it had in the pool in Pensacola. I was only getting more tangled up. Daytime, warm water, and an inflated flotation vest were all factors on the plus side, but I was growing concerned about becoming trapped.

In a pocket on the right front of my survival-gear vest I had a razor-sharp folding knife, standard issue for cutting through parachute lines. But in all of my training I had been warned to cut lines only as a last resort. "Cut one line, and it becomes two lines," our trainers warned, a statement that seemed remarkably sensible at the time, and they urged us to try swimming out of the mess. But the school solution was not working, and I decided I had to cut my way out of those lines, to "John Wayne it" I would say later. I retrieved the orange-handled knife.

I tried to use the curved safety blade, but it didn't work at all, so I went for the four-inch straight blade. There had been a problem with the blades opening inadvertently during equipment inspections, so the survival equipment riggers duct-taped the blades closed. I smiled at the ridiculous situation I now found myself in, using my thumbnail to try to find the end of a strip of duct tape. I promised myself on the spot that for the rest of my flying days I would always fold over the end of the tape to create a little pull-tab, a vow I kept.

Eventually I peeled off the tape and opened the blade, then scooped together a loop of parachute lines with my left hand and sliced through it with my right. The straight blade succeeded where the curved blade failed, and the lines cut away cleanly. I was frankly amazed at how well it worked.

Time in the water, less than a minute.

Still entangled in about half the rigging, I felt a sudden surge of relief as I was sprayed and buffeted by the rotor wash from the SH-3 Sea King rescue helicopter overhead. Rules required that a helicopter fly in close proximity of the carrier during all takeoffs and landings, but its presence was something you tended to forget as long as everything went smoothly. The chop of the big helicopter's rotors was a welcome sight now. In our case, helo pilot Lieutenant Commander Sam Taylor had been watching as 205 went over the side and was in the perfect position to get to us immediately.

I looked up to see a rescue crewman's face looking down from the open side door, less than fifty feet above me. Feeling comfortable – and happy to be alive – I gave him a big thumbs-up and a grin, but then I was startled to see the helicopter bank and fly away. I admit, I was so focused on my own situation, I had forgotten about Commander Switzer. Now I realized I wasn't the only one in harm's way.

Commander Switzer was about a hundred feet behind me and could see that I was struggling with my parachute lines. As soon as the helicopter arrived above him, he waved it back to me. When the chopper returned to my position less than a minute later, I was still sawing at lines and beginning to realize how true the trainers' warning had been. The tough nylon lines seemed to be multiplying.

Overhead, the helo lowered a rescue sling on a cable and was maneuvering it close to me. I thought again about those aviators dragged down by their chutes, and decided I didn't want to become another depressing case study. I stopped what I was doing and grabbed the rescue sling.

Lieutenant Commander Taylor put the sling in the water just a few feet from me and dragged it forward with surprising delicacy while I swam toward it. The blinding wind and pelting saltwater spray would have been almost painful in another situation, but at this moment they were comforting as I decided that, more than anything, I wanted to be attached to that helicopter. It was simple to wrap the sling around me and fasten it, and this time I gave a thumbs-up with enthusiasm. Beam me up, Scotty!

I was still entangled, and as the crewman slowly raised me I reached down to grab another handful of nylon lines. They cut easily, but as I cleared the water I was still snagged on too many lines. The crewman lowered me to ease the weight of the rigging and I made another grab and slashed through the worst of the tangle. This time when the crewman raised me, the last few nylon lines slipped free of my gear and fell into the sea.

Determined to show that I had paid attention in training, I concentrated on my job of hugging the sling and allowed the rescue crewmen to do their jobs. They pulled me into the helo.

Safely inside the copter's cabin, I had my first opportunity to assess the situation, and I decided I was happy. I checked my watch and estimated I had been in the water about three minutes. I was fairly calm at this point, having focused almost all of my attention on the satisfaction of solving small problems. I went down a quick checklist of my body parts and realized how fortunate I was not to have any injuries or even discomfort. Despite the struggle with the parachute rigging, I hadn't had to fight for my life. It had been an assault on the senses, but the equipment worked, and I was prepared for every step of the way.

I turned now to look around at the rescue crew, and heard Petty Officer Ernie Lashua say, "We've lost the pilot." I was alarmed and thought I had waited too long to eject, that Skipper Switzer had paid for my hesitation with his life. But they had only lost sight of him as he drifted in the open sea, and in a few moments we flew to his location.

As we approached, I looked out the open door and saw him calmly floating in smooth water, his parachute bundled beside him in a comically small pile. It hadn't deployed, just spilled open on impact. This time the helicopter lowered a swimmer into the water to assist. Petty Officer Jeff Marshall checked the skipper for injuries that might require the body rig the Sea King carried, and I was relieved to see him proceed with the simple sling. They rode up together on the cable.

When they pulled Commander Switzer into the helo, we shook hands. I shouted over the noise, “Did we do anything wrong?” He slowly shook his head no as he thought back over the last few confusing and harrowing minutes.

He reached up, grinning, and patted Lieutenant Commander Taylor and copilot Lieutenant Commander Jim Carlin on the shoulder. He told them, “Great job. Thanks!”

The *Constellation* was a mile or so away. As the helo approached for landing, I began to make out personnel clustered on the deck, and a dreadful thought came to me. I prepared myself for the possibility that this story might not have a happy ending after all. When a cable carrying enough tension to stop a fighter jet fails suddenly, all its energy is released and it becomes a massive bullwhip easily capable of cutting a man in two. A loose arresting wire can break bones and crush organs.

As we hovered above the deck, it became clear that tragedy had been averted on the carrier flight deck, too. Dozens of crew members had spontaneously gathered to welcome our safe return.

We walked to the *Constellation's* medical ward, where squadron-mates brought us dry clothes. In the hours after the incident we received complete physicals with an emphasis on X-rays to spot spinal injuries. The docs discovered that Commander Switzer suffered a cracked vertebra, and they ordered him off the flight schedule for thirty days.

In the hours and days that followed, we learned what caused the mishap.

There are four identical arresting wires on the flight deck, and a landing aircraft can catch any one of them to make a safe landing. Since aircraft weights vary considerably, the shock-absorbing machinery at each end of a wire—the valves and hydraulics that bleed away the energy of a speeding jet plane at a dramatic but measured rate—must be set to the weight of the incoming aircraft. Personnel in the tower and on the flight deck report aircraft type to the arresting gear crew, who then set the valves.

In our case, the crewman assigned to set the valves on the number four wire was new to the job, not yet fully qualified. When the crews for the other three wires reported they had set their valves, he made the same report but hadn't actually set anything. The number four wire was left at its previous setting of 14,000 pounds, far short of what was required to catch our 52,000-pound Tomcat. By the time his supervisor noticed the mistake it was too late, and all of the sailors in the area were lucky to escape without serious injury when the equipment came apart.

There was a backup system using repeater gauges, but the gauges for the number four wire had not worked in some time. Safe operations relied on the voice report from the arresting gear room.

On that day, Renegade 205's tailhook engaged the fourth wire, whose 14,000 pounds of tension slowed us down a few knots. But then the cable played out freely down the length of landing area until the arresting gear mechanism was completely overwhelmed and the cable snapped. Fortunately the arresting cable broke free at both ends at the same moment, preventing a gigantic whiplash that would have caused havoc on the flight deck, and the Tomcat dragged the spent cable down the deck and harmlessly over the carrier's side into the ocean.

There was an investigation, of course, and conclusions were fed back into the live-and-learn system of naval aviation operations.

Skipper Switzer and I also learned about other corners of the event.

Given that they could see me flailing with my parachute and lines, it might have seemed prudent for the helicopter crew to put a swimmer in the water to help me. They skipped doing this, however, to get me onboard as quickly as possible. From their altitude, they could see that my chute was already starting to go underwater, sucked down in the *Constellation's* immense, swirling wake. This was something I hadn't even considered, and was glad I didn't know.

Renegade 205, known to the Navy as F-14A number 159623, floated for about three minutes before sinking, just about the time I was being hauled into the helicopter. The Navy did not attempt to recover the fighter, so you're welcome to look for it. Its location is 5° 26' South, 73° 39' East. It's on the bottom of the Indian Ocean, approximately 14,000 feet straight down.