

THE NIGHT MY JET EXPLODED



Illustrated by Art Kehrt

When a plane rips apart mid-air, it takes a miracle to live through it—and that's what saved this Marine flyer.

by M/Sgt. Alois Motil, U.S. Marine Corps

as told to Norman Sklarewitz

THIS IS A STORY of a miracle. Not a great or awesome one, perhaps. Yet it was a miracle. I am completely convinced of this, although for proof I can offer only one fact: I am alive today.

My story began in Korea at the Marine air base near Kunsan, on the western coast. The date was Sept. 1, 1952. We flew the deadly F3D Sky Knight jet, and I was half of a two-man crew assigned to one of these interceptors.

In combat it was my job to monitor the eerily glowing dials and scopes that would reveal any Communist planes attempting to drive past our air defenses. If they tried such a penetration, we were there—six miles up in the Korean night—ready to make the kill.

These missions were called CAP—combat air patrol—and I was slated to fly one on the fateful morning of my miracle. Take-off time was 2 a. m., so around midnight the young major who was my pilot and I went into our mission briefing.

The weather was going to be bad, we were told. Driving rain and low-hanging clouds had already closed down all aircraft except those like our Sky Knight which was instrument-packed for just this kind of blind flying.

Right on schedule we were cleared, and the powerful plane screamed off into the night. The take-off routine called for a straight climb-out, a relatively direct course out over the Yellow Sea,

then up to position this side of the Yalu River.

The Sky Knight was still rocketing up about 90 seconds later when suddenly there was a blinding white flash and a deafening blast. The aircraft bucked violently. Our right jet engine had exploded; it literally tore itself apart, disintegrated in a mass of flying metal and fire.

The plane could, however, return to base on its remaining engine, so for a second I assumed we were in no serious danger. I spoke into my microphone to the pilot: "Shall I turn on the emergency IFF?" This was an automatic signal that would send a coded message permitting our air base to determine where our plane was—if it went down.

But the pilot couldn't hear me. The blast had evidently knocked out all our radio equipment.

I turned to shout into his ear—and then it happened: the plane itself exploded! In a fury of flame and a terror of noise, it was blown to bits.

The next sensation I had was that I was struggling against some unknown force. My arms were thrashing wildly, and then I realized I was in cold, black water.

A terrible haze swirled through my head. I couldn't remember who I was or what had happened. It seemed I was caught up in an awful nightmare, dropping endlessly through space, turning, but never reaching the end of the plunge.

Then slowly, through the pain, my burning brain

began to function. I remembered being in the cockpit on our take-off, making about 325 m.p.h. Then the explosion—and nothing.

I tasted the bitter salt of the Yellow Sea and realized the first of the incredible things that were to happen this night: I reached behind me and touched my seat parachute. It was there, neatly folded in its cover. It had never been opened.

I had been hurled out of the plane and knocked unconscious. I had fallen anywhere from 300 to 1,300 feet—without a chute—into the water.

A DESPERATE feeling of loneliness swept over me. The darkness of the night engulfed me; the driving rain and heaving sea lifted me up high, then let me drop back, gasping for air, spitting out sickening mouthfuls of salt water.

My head ached. I tried to touch it. It was sticky and felt strange—I couldn't know it was split open in a hideous skull fracture. My right hand also hurt, but the night concealed the fact that the skin had been ripped from it, leaving the flesh open and the tendons severed.

Then with a finality that hope could not dissuade, I knew that I was going to die. With the sodden parachute slung under me and my heavy flying gear on, I weighed 250 pounds or more. I could not swim much longer. I had been injured seriously.

I did not become panicky, nor was I really afraid. Death seemed to be a completely logical end to this strange incident. I accepted it, for I knew that my body was broken and my whirling mind could not direct the impossible efforts required to survive.

And so I prepared to die as best I could. I made my last act of contrition and thought longingly of my wife and children. I wondered who would care

for them, and my heart ached. But I was not frightened for myself, just sad at the separation.

There wasn't much time left, so I hurried. I said a simple prayer to the Virgin Mary. I asked her forgiveness and her blessing. Then I relaxed. Having made my peace with God, I was ready.

It was at this instant that the light appeared! A white shaft cut through the rain and fog, bathing the waters around me in an uncanny glow. The beam seemed to come from behind me. I tried to turn to see where it came from.

Despite my craning, its source remained behind me. Yet the pale luminescence danced all around. It was to fade away as quickly and mysteriously as it came. But with that light came life. My mind cleared as if all that had happened was a dream and now I was awake to the brilliant sunshine.

The sadness, the confusion, the utter and terrible weariness and aching were gone. I realized fully both the danger I faced and, more important, the need to fight it. In that instant, I knew I was not going to die, that I could yet live if only I tried.

Then the years of Marine training, the escape drills, the crash-survival practices returned to merge into an almost automatic reflex pattern. I realized I had not even inflated my life vest. A quick jerk on each of the two toggles punctured the gas cartridges, and the yellow vest swelled up into full buoyancy.

Next I freed myself of the dragging, dead weight of the parachute. Then I struggled to pull the one-man dingy that is part of a flier's survival gear from its cover and inflate it.

This was far from easy. My right hand was virtually useless, and my shoulder was almost dislocated from the terrific force of being hurled

out of the plane while still tightly strapped in.

Yet this, too, was done. The tiny boat blew itself into shape.

I was too weak to climb into it, so I shoved one end down into the water and rolled in. Once aboard, I removed one of my boots and used it to bail out the water.

Under my Mae West life vest I wore an Air Force survival kit. It bulged with lifesaving little gadgets—flares, extra rounds of tracer ammunition for my .38 revolver, a flashlight.

I shivered with the cold, faint from pain. Still, though I was less than a speck on a sea blanketed with clouds and shrouded by night, I no longer doubted I would be saved. More exactly, that I would be rescued: I had already been saved.

ABOUT 4 A. M. I saw the lights of an Air Force AB-26 toward shore. The plane flew back and forth low over the water, hunting for the missing plane or some sign of its crew.

Excitedly, I fired my pistol with its tracers and tore away the pins that ignited two of my precious flares. But the searchers failed to see me. I had been blown well away from shore and they evidently were scanning the waters nearer the coast.

My reaction was one of anger rather than fear. If this plane didn't locate me, another would later. To me it seemed not a matter of if I would be found, but merely when.

My raft had floated well out to sea, into white-capped waves. Even so, I felt in good hands. I was.

As the first light of dawn eased up over the shore line, I saw the nervously probing beam of a searchlight. It jerked back and forth, bouncing off the low-lying cloud banks overhead.

It came from an Air Force rescue crash boat stationed at the town of Kunsan near our air base. As the craft bore down in its search pattern, I fired off the last of my flares. Twenty minutes later I was down in the cabin of the powerful boat.

Another two hours and I was in an Army hospital, where drugs eased my pain and closed my eyes in sleep. For two months I was hospitalized as my skull was closed in a series of operations, and skin grafts were taken on my hand.

Yet I was anxious to leave the hospital. I had to learn, if I could, the source of the light that had saved my life.

When finally I was released, I returned to Kunsan and one evening sat down in the operations hut. Digging out the squadron chart books and reports, I turned back to the entries of Sept. 1.

The celestial navigation tables came first. They revealed that there was no moon that night. The operational reports of the Air Rescue Squadron were next. These told me that no helicopters, boats, or other search craft were sent out after us that night until long after the time the light appeared.

I talked to pilots and crewmen. No one could give me any clue.

It was finally in a crude chapel there in Korea that I found the answer. There, my voice choked with emotion, I repeated my story to the padre.

He listened in silence, then spoke. "You do not have to seek from me the answer to your question, my son. You know how you were saved."

This I do. And what of my pilot that terrible night? His body was washed ashore 45 days afterward. He had been killed instantly while sitting just one foot from me.