

JUD ! YOU ARE ON F-I-R-E ! GET O-U-T OF T-H-E-R-E !

Our in-flight refueling process was necessary and routine because the F-8 Crusader could not hold enough fuel to fly from California to Hawaii.

Soon, after plugging-in to the tanker, my fuel gauges stirred, showing that all was well. In my cockpit, I was relaxed and confident. My thoughts were, "In a few hours I knew we'd all be having dinner at the Kaneohe O'Club on Oahu."

My fuel gauges indicated that the tanks were almost full. Then - THUD ! I heard the crack of an explosion. Instantly, I could see the RPM gauge unwinding with the tailpipe temperature dropping. The engine had quit – a flame-out !

I punched the mike button : "This is Jud. I've got a flame-out !"

Unfortunately, my radio was already dead; I was neither sending nor receiving.

I quickly disconnected from the refueling tanker and nosed over, into a shallow dive, to pick up some flying speed to help re-start the engine. I needed those few seconds to think.

I yanked the handle that extended the air-driven emergency electrical generator (RAT) into the slipstream hoping to get ignition for an air start. The igniter's clicked gamely, and the RPM indicator started to climb slowly, as did the tailpipe temperature. For one tantalizing moment I thought everything would be all right. But the RPM indicator hung uncertainly at 30 percent . . . refused to go any faster.

Jet fuel poured over the canopy and the RED FIRE WARNING light blinked ON. At the same instant, powered by the RAT, my radio came back on. And a great babble of voices burst through my earphones.

Fuel was pouring out of my aircraft . . . from its tailpipe . . . from under the wings . . . the fuel had flowed together, then it ignited in a great awesome trail of fire !

I told my flight leader : " I'm getting out ! "

I took my hands off the flight controls and reached above my head for the canvas curtain that would start the ejection sequence. I pulled it down hard over my face and waited for the tremendous kick in the pants, rocketing me upward.

Nothing happened ! The canopy was designed to jettison in the first part of the ejection sequence. But it did not move. It was still in place. And so was I.

I reached down between my knees for the alternate ejection-firing handle, and gave it a vigorous pull. Nothing happened. I was trapped in the burning aircraft.

The plane was now in a steep 60-degree dive. For the first time, I felt panic softening the edges of my determination. I knew that I had to do something or I was going to die in this sick airplane. With great effort, I pulled my thoughts together and tried to imagine some solution as a voice in my earphones was shouting : "Ditch it! "

That suggestion must have come from the re-fueling tanker skipper or one of the destroyer commanders because every jet fighter pilot knows you can't ditch a jet fighter and survive. Upon impact with the water, it would usually destroy itself.

I grabbed the control stick and leveled the aircraft. Then I yanked the alternate ejection handle once again. Nothing. That left me with only one imaginable way out :

jettison the canopy manually, release your seat belt and harness, then jump out of the aircraft.

I was not aware of any Crusader pilot who had ever used this World War II tactic to get out of a fast flying jet fighter. I had been told that this procedure, of bailing out of a jet, was almost impossible. The Crusader's high vertical fin's were almost certain to strike the pilot's body and kill him.

My desperation was growing, and any scheme that offered a shred of success seemed better than riding the aircraft into the sea swells. I disconnected the canopy with my hands. And it disappeared with a great whoosh.

To move the tail slightly out of the way of my exiting body, I trimmed the aircraft to fly in a sideways skid . . . nose high and with the rudder trimmed in a ' crab ' to the right. I stood up in the seat, and held both arms in front of my face.

I was harshly sucked out of the airplane. I cringed as I tumbled outside, expecting the tail to cut me in half ! But instantly, I knew I was uninjured. I was going too fast, so I waited . . . and waited . . . until my body decelerated to terminal velocity. Then I pulled the parachute's D-ring and braced for the opening shock.

No opening shock. I heard a loud pop above me, but continued falling rapidly. As I looked up, I saw the small pilot chute had deployed. But the main, 24-foot parachute had not opened ! I was stunned with disbelief and horror as I saw the parachute's neatly arranged white folds in a bundle entangled by its shroud lines. Frantically, I shook and jerked the risers in an attempt to open the main chute. That didn't work. Hand over hand, I pulled the parachute bundle down toward me, then wrestled with the shroud lines trying to get the chute to billow open. But, the parachute remained as a closed bundle with shroud lines wrapped around it. All the while I am falling like a rock toward the Pacific ocean.

I noticed a ring of turbulence in the ocean. It looked like a big stone had been thrown in the water with white froth in the center. I quickly realized it was my Crusader crashing.

“Would I be next to crash? ”

Again, I shook the parachute risers and jerked on the shroud lines, but the rushing air was holding my chute in a tight bundle. I began to realize that I had done all I could reasonably do. I was just along for a brutal ride that may kill or severely injure me.

I have no recollection of positioning myself properly nor even bracing for the impact. In fact, I don't remember slamming into the water at all. At one instant, I was falling fast toward the ocean. Suddenly, I was very cold. And in an eerie world of half-consciousness, I thought : “Am I alive ? ”

I finally decided : “Yes, I think I am . . . ”

The cold water helped clear my senses. But as I flopped around ingesting water, I began cough-ing and retching. The Mae West around my waist had inflated. I concluded that the shrill whistling sound that I had heard was the gas leaving the CO2 cylinders as it was filling the life vest. A sense of urgency gripped me as my mind told me there were some task I was supposed to do next. Then I dawned on me

what it was. I need to get rid of the parachute ! It had billowed out underwater, and it was now tugging me down.

I tried reaching down for my hunting knife located in the knee pocket of my flight suit. I had to cut the shroud lines before the parachute pulled me under for good. This is when I first discovered that I was injured severely. The pain was excruciating. Was my back broken ? I tried to arch it slightly and felt the pain again. As I tried moving my feet, I could feel my broken ankle bones grating against each other.

There was no chance of getting that hunting knife, but I had another, smaller knife one in the upper torso of my flight suit. With difficulty, I extracted it and began slashing feebly at the spaghetti-like mess of lines surrounding me.

Once free of the parachute, I began a tentative search for my survival pack. It should have been strapped to my hips. And it contained my one-man life raft, canned water, food, fishing gear and dye markers. Not there. The impact had ripped it off my body. "How long would the Mae West sustain me ? " I wasn't sure, but I knew I needed help fast. The salt water that I had swallowed felt like a rock in the pit of my gut. And, here I was, solo, 600 miles from shore, lolling in the deep troughs and crests of the vast Pacific. And my Crusader, upon which we had lavished such affection, was sinking thousands of feet to the ocean's bottom.

In about ten minutes, I heard the drone of propellers. Flying very low, the pot-bellied, four-engine refueling tanker came into view. They dropped several green dye markers near me and some smoke flares a short distance away. Then they circled overhead and dropped an inflated life raft about 50 yards from me. I was so pleased and tried to swim toward the raft. When I took two strokes, I all most blacked out due to the intense pain. The tanker circled again and dropped another raft closer to me, but there was no way for me to get to it . . . then in it . . . in my condition.

The water seemed to be getting colder, and a chill gripped me. I looked at my watch, but the so-called unbreakable crystal was shattered, and the hour and minute hands were torn away. I tried to relax and surrender to the Pacific Ocean swells. I could almost have enjoyed being buoyed up to the crest of one swell and gently sliding into the trough of the next, but I was in such excruciating pain.

In about an hour, a Coast Guard amphibian plane flew over and circled me as though deciding whether or not to land. But the seas were too high. And, I knew he couldn't make it down, then make a successful take-off. He came in very low and dropped another raft; this one had a 200-foot floating lanyard attached. The end of the lanyard landed barely ten feet from me. Using only my arms, I paddled gently backward. I caught hold of it and pulled the raft to me. I knew I couldn't crawl into the raft due to my physical condition. But I was able to get a good grip on its side and hold on. And this gave me a little more security.

The Coast Guard amphibian pilot gained altitude and flew off and found some minesweepers returning from the Far East . He was not able to tune to their radio frequency, but the ingenious pilot lowered a wire and dragged it across one of the minesweeper's bows, then rocked his wings heading back toward me. The minesweeper captain understood. He instantly veered off and headed at top speed in my direction.

I was fully conscious during the two and a half hours it took the minesweeper to reach me. I spotted the ship while teetering on the crest of a wave. Soon, its great bow was pushing in close toward me. Sailors in orange life jackets were crowding its lifelines. A bearded man in a black rubber suit jumped into the water and swam to me.

“Are you hurt?” he asked. “Yes,” I said. “My legs and my back.” I was now very cold and was concerned about increasing numbness in my legs. Perhaps, the imminence of rescue had made me light-headed for I only vaguely remember being hoisted aboard the ship. I was laid out on the ship’s deck as they cut away my flight suit.

“Don’t touch my legs ! Don’t touch my legs ! ” I screamed. I don’t remember saying that. But then somebody gave me a shot of morphine. It erased part of my extreme pain.

An hour or so later, a man was bending over me and asking questions. A doctor had been 'high-lined' over from the cruiser, USS Los Angeles, now stationed along side the sweeper. He asked me, “You have a long scar on your abdomen. How did it get there?” I told him about a serious auto accident I’d had four years earlier in Texas , and that my spleen had been removed. He grunted and asked more questions while he continued examining me. Then he said, “You and I are going to take a little trip over to the USS Los Angeles; it’s steaming along side.”

They got me into a wire stretcher, and hauled me, dangling and dipping, across the watery interval between the ships. In the Los Angeles’s sickbay——thank God they gave me another shot of morphine before they started thrusting all sorts of hoses into my body. I could tell from all their activity, and their intense, hushed voices, that they were very worried about my condition. My body temperature was down to 94 degrees; my intestines and kidneys were in shock. The doctors never left my side during the night. They took my blood pressure every 15 minutes. I was unable to sleep, until finally, I threw-up about a quart or more of seawater and my nausea was relieved a bit.

By listening to the medical team, I was able to piece together the nature of my injuries. My left ankle was broken in five places. My right ankle was broken in three places. A tendon in my left foot was cut. My right pelvis was fractured. My number seven vertebra was fractured. My left lung had partially collapsed. There were many cuts and bruises all over my face and body, and my intestines and kidneys had been stunned into complete inactivity.

The next morning, Dr. Valentine Rhodes told me that the U.S.S. Los Angeles was steaming at flank speed to a rendezvous with a helicopter 100 miles off shore from Long Beach . At 3:30 that afternoon, I was hoisted into the belly of a Marine helicopter, and we whirled off to a hospital ship, the USS Haven, docked in Long Beach.

Once aboard the Haven, doctors came at me from all sides with more needles, tubes, and X-ray machines. Their reaction to my condition was so much more optimistic than I had expected. So, I finally let go a few tears of relief, exhaustion, and thanks to God and to all hands.

Within a few months, I was all systems go again. My ankles were put back in place with the help of steel pins. The partially collapsed left lung re-inflated and my kidneys and intestines were working again without artificial prodding.

The Marine Corps discovered the cause of my flame-out, was the failure of an automatic cut-off switch in the refueling system. The aircraft's main fuel tank was made of heavy reinforced, rubber. When the cut-off switch failed, this allowed the tank at high pressure, to go beyond its capacity. The tank burst like a rubber balloon causing a flame-out and very spectacular fire.

We will never know why the ejection seat failed because it is on the bottom of the ocean. The failure of the parachute is a mystery also. Like they say, "Some days you are the dog, but others you are the dog's fire-plug."

Do I feel lucky ?

That word doesn't even begin to describe my feelings. To survive a 15,000-foot free fall with an unopened chute is a fair enough feat. But my mind keeps running back to something Dr. Rhodes told me during those grim and desperate hours. He said that if I had had a spleen, the spleen would have most certainly ruptured at impact and I would have bled to death internally. Of the 25 fighter pilots in our squadron, I'm the only one who didn't have a spleen.

That always gives me something to think about. Perhaps it does you as well.

Source : Chapter 7 in author Ron Knott's new book : 'SUPERSONIC COWBOYS' (which shares forty-five Crusader stories) " I Fell 15,000 Feet And Lived " by Cliff Judkins [abridged]. Amazingly, Cliff Judkins not only survived this ordeal but he also returned to flight status. He was flying the F-8 Crusader again within six months after the accident. After leaving the Marine Corps, he was hired as a pilot with Delta Airlines, later retiring as a Captain.
