

A Young Carrier Pilot Gets His Feet Wet

By Harry Kraemer

The carrier-based fighter pilot faces a lot of challenges throughout his/her career. However, landing on the carrier may be one of the toughest and most demanding. Imagine lining your aircraft up with a small pitching runway and going to full power as you touch down in case you miss the arresting gear. The

touchdown and stop within seconds is just a routine landing on a carrier! A mechanical problem with the aircraft just adds to the excitement, as a young aviator named Bob Lunsford found out Sept. 16, 1944.

It was during the invasion of Palau Island, and Lunsford was flying Combat Air Patrol, and took off in an FM-2 from the carrier Saginaw Bay at 12:30 on that day, with full ammunition and enough fuel for about six

hours. It was Lunsford's second day in combat, so naturally he was eager for some action. His flight was assigned to fly air patrol over the carrier, which they did until about 2:30. In a letter home about the patrol, he wrote, "To circle around doing nothing is very tiresome."

They decided to have a look at some Japanese held territory. They were flying at 8,000 feet, looking the situation over, when

all of a sudden the air was full of anti-aircraft fire. "Naturally that peeved us, for the Japs to start shooting, so we peeled off and went down shooting. We headed for the gun emplacements and made them run like hell."

As Lunsford pulled up and started climbing out, anti-aircraft fire blew up beneath his aircraft. It jolted the plane and shook him up. Boy, that was close, he thought. He looked his aircraft over and found no visible damage. After a photo pass, the flight decided it was time to return to the carrier.

Lunsford and his flight were circling the carrier as it turned into the wind for their landing. One by one, each plane lowered its tail hook — every plane except Lunsford's. The anti-aircraft fire must have damaged his tail hook.

"I pulled and pushed, and I kicked and I cussed, but the damn thing still wouldn't come down," Lunsford said. By then, it was about 5 p.m., and Lunsford was just about sweating blood. Desperate, he tried everything. He even used a small knife he had to cut and unscrew anything and everything he could find around the tail hook release mechanism without result.

Lunsford knew this meant a barrier crash on the carrier or a water landing. The stories about the sharks that patrolled the area worried him about a water landing, and besides that, he could see them. It was as if the sharks were waiting for him. He thought about going to a nearby airfield, but had heard over the radio that it was still held by the Japanese.

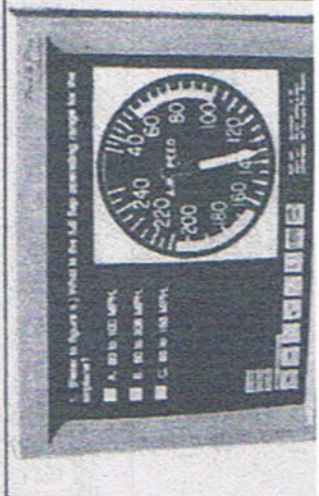
He was told by the carrier to shoot up most of his ammunition to make his plane lighter and less dangerous for landing. As a last resort, he took his pistol and tried to shoot the tail hook cable in two (hoping that it would free fall once the cable was cut). That just made a lot of noise in the cockpit and put holes in the wings.

With fuel running low, the carrier radioed Lunsford to prepare for a crash landing on the ship. He released the emergency cockpit enclosure release and off went the canopy. As he prepared his plane for a crash landing on the carrier, he was told that they now wanted him to land in the water next to a nearby destroyer that would pick him up. (A barrier crash on the carrier could put the carrier out of commission for a while, and the ship's captain did not want that.) That was not what he had wanted to hear.

He thought if he survived the water landing, if he could get out of his plane before it sank, then came the sharks. "I could just see

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He thought if he survived the water landing, if he could get out of his plane before it sank, then came the sharks. "I could just see those sharks making a meal on my own drum sticks." With his gas gauge showing less than five gallons of fuel remaining, time was running out. He started to throw everything out of the cockpit to reduce the risk of being hurt by flying objects.

"I came across a mirror in the plane, and when I looked in it, I saw a contorted face with streaks of sweat and dry lips looking at me as if to say, 'you poor ****', let's see you get yourself out of this mess."

The destroyer turned into the wind, so Lunsford could land parallel to it into the wind. With his seatbelt tightened, gear up, and full flaps, he started down. Just above the water, he leveled off and eased back on the throttle. Slower and slower. At around 60 miles per hour, he cut the switch and hoped for the best.

Just before touchdown, he started to fire his guns, which helped to slow the plane even more and lessened the force at impact. It was 5:58 p.m. when Ensign Lunsford hit the water with a big splash. With his plane sinking fast, he had only one thing on his mind — Get out fast! He tried to get his life raft out, but the cockpit was already filling with seawater. He decided to abandon ship without it. With his Mae West inflated, he floated and watched his airplane sink. It wasn't long before the destroyer had a crew on the way to pick him up. He spent the night on the destroyer and was returned to his carrier the next day.

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