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THE WINGS OF DARKEST NIGHT
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WRIGHT

DEATH IN THE ATLANTIC

2 May 2004

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This is just another story about naval aviation---there are many more that I could tell. I chose this one because it will give you a feeling for the thin line that existed between life and death in the daily operations of an air squadron at sea. It was during the “cold war” era and the USA needed to know where Russian submarines were located---so there was a constant requirement for ocean-surveillance patrols, and for training exercises to sharpen our anti-submarine skills. At that time, I was an enlisted air-crewman.

Air Anti-Submarine Squadron Twenty Two---VS-22----Naval Air Force, Atlantic Fleet, was based at Naval Air Station, Norfolk Virginia (*it also was frequently based on various aircraft carriers*). At the time of this account, VS-22 was assigned to patrol a large sector of ocean off the Virginia coast. This was an around-the-clock operation and it was in the middle of winter. A hunter-killer team of two aircraft had been on patrol for about 3 hours, and the time was drawing near for the next team to fly out and take over the search. It was about midnight, and the relief crews were in the squadron ready room, preparing for flight. I was a Second-Class Electronics Technician and I was in one of those crews. Since there was always a chance that an aircrew might be forced to parachute-out or be forced to crash land at sea, we were wearing “poopy” suits. Each suit was thick, uncomfortable, all-rubber underwear that was like an infant’s sleepwear---the only openings were for the neck and the hands (*and these openings could be drawn-up tightly to keep out the water*). The suit was designed to allow a person to live about 30 minutes in the freezing ocean---by that time, the crewman should have gotten his individual survival raft inflated and crawled into it. Of course, we also wore the conventional wool-lined leather flight clothing and boots to ward off the cold. Even so, the reality was that any chance for aircrew survival in or on the vast, frigid ocean in winter was nearly non-existent.

In the ready room, it was explained to us that we would be searching a given square grid---about 100 miles across---on the ocean, and that at least one of our own submarines would be operating in that same grid. It would be a serious cat-and-mouse game of hide and seek. But, just as we were making final preparations for departure, a message came in from Control Tower Operations that one of our patrolling aircraft had accidentally crashed at sea. Of course, that was terrible news.

Here is how it happened. The U.S. submarine Razorback had surfaced 100 miles offshore and was, at the time, cooperating with the VS-22 search aircraft. The “killer” aircraft could practice homing runs on the submarine as the boat was surfaced, and try to find it while it was submerged. The Avenger aircraft was making a mock attack on the surfaced submarine when the plane just seemed to fly directly into the water. It might be that its electronic altimeter was faulty and/or that the pilot merely misjudged the height (if he could see anything)---or that the engine had just stopped instantly at a very-low altitude by an electrical or mechanical malfunction. We will never know.

At the time, the lookouts on the bridge of the submarine “witnessed” the crash, even though it was pitch black on the Atlantic. The plane probably had its searchlight turned on as it approached the vessel. The sub radioed the incident to the Atlantic Fleet HQ and immediately rigged its own searchlight, and tried to maneuver---about to look for survivors in the rough, choppy sea. A survivor was seen in the water and the submarine sent a person---tethered by a line---to assist and rescue. Just as the person was about halfway to the downed airman, the searchlight malfunctioned and went out, and could not be re-lighted. In the pitch-blackness, the rescue person had to be pulled back. When another light could be rigged, the airman had disappeared from sight.

We---in the relief flight---were dispatched to carry flares to the sea locale. We were to fly over the area and drop flares so that the sub, and other ships that were taking part in the rescue-search, would have some chance to locate survivors. The submarine was directing the search, and its strange-sounding call name was Lobo. Before we had arrived on the scene, a long-range patrol plane had begun methodically dropping flares as directed by Lobo.

As that plane continued to drop a large pattern of flares, we continued to circle the area, awaiting our turn to participate. At about the time we should have set a course back to NAS Norfolk---because our aviation fuel was almost gone---the submarine directed us to begin dropping flares. We were nearly running on empty as we eventually headed back westward toward the coastline. With our fingers crossed, we kept hoping that we would make it back safely and that we would not become victims of the Navy's modus-operandi.

There was still no glimmer of light from the coastline when the engine suddenly coughed, backfired and cut out, and a big ball of fire from the exhaust came by the cockpit where I was sitting. The single-engine plane instantly started dropping, and the pilot was frantically trying to decide what we should do. The aircraft weighed 7 tons and had a glide angle of 45 degrees. We were going down fast. Just as we thought we were doomed and needed to do something quickly, the pilot tried switching to the emergency fuel pump and the engine coughed, sputtered and seemed to catch on again---and now the engine was sputtering, but was running. The pilot said to prepare, and stand-by, for the order to bail out. We always wore a parachute harness, but we used quick-attachable chest-pack parachutes, temporarily stored in the cockpit. I grabbed my chute and quickly snapped it on---then strapped my life raft around me. Then, I grabbed the canopy-opening-latch with one hand and my helmet intercom cord with the other hand. I had to be ready to disconnect the helmet cord so that it did not tether me to the aircraft when I opened the hatch to jump out. We had a choice---we could (1) fly down near the water and try for a controlled crash, hoping that we would not meet the same fate as our buddies who had accidentally crashed earlier, or (2) we could stay at this altitude and bail out when the engine failed again. We chose the latter, even though we knew that we could run out of fuel at any moment or that the engine could stop again instantly. Either way, thoughts of the black, freezing ocean were scary.

At the time, I was so busy thinking—over and over---about the correct procedure for getting safely out of the plane that I kept my wits about me. But I remember that one of the other crewmen was crying loudly and was very irrational. I worried that he would not do the right thing, though his chances of survival were not good, even if he did successfully exit the plane and parachute to the black water below. I immediately thought back to the time aboard a carrier when I had won a contest---a drill to see who could exit an airplane the quickest in an emergency. Could I do it now?

At long last, far ahead, there was the glow of the lighted coastline---and after an eternity, there afar was the NAS rotating beacon. But we still had miles to go and our fuel tank registered bone dry. We were taking a big gamble, because bailing out now would mean allowing the aircraft to crash into a heavily-populated area of a city. If we somehow made it home, we would save an expensive airplane. As we finally touched down on the runway, we gave a sigh of relief. Only fumes were left in our tank. We had gambled and (luckily) won. Lobo should have allowed us to drop our flares when we first arrived, and then ordered the long-range patrol plane to resume after we had depleted our flares.

As I was walking from the plane to the hanger, I was priding myself on how cool I had been----when suddenly I noticed that I had my parachute attached upside-downwards. The squadron's Survival Equipment Specialist on duty said that the chute would have merely fallen off me when I pulled the rip cord. Whew! That was a scary thought for me to ponder as I slipped into my bunk, and then stared at the ceiling, just before daylight. I realized that I had not been cool---just lucky.

No survivors were rescued that night by the seven ships taking part in the search. Subsequently, 100 aircraft would participate in the search. The next day, two of the four bodies were found by the submarine Diablo. The other crewmen (in some form) are still somewhere in the ocean, probably inside the aircraft.

Curt Michelson (Sister Bay, Wisconsin) and Ron Campbell (Emmett, Idaho), two good friends of mine, were crewmen in that plane that crashed at sea. The pilot was Ensign William Barrett and the other crewman was Chief Petty Officer Alvin Merrifield. Although it was difficult to stop thinking about our lost friends, the flight schedule was posted and air operations still had to be carried out on a regular basis. To this day, I can still hear the mournful sound of Lobo directing the search by radio, can still envision the eerie light from the swaying flares, and can still invoke the shaky feeling of being precariously above the freezing Atlantic on that very dark night.

There were other crashes and other deaths in our squadron, and in the other squadrons around us. Naval aviation is very dangerous, and stories such as this often become part of the daily fare. Navy wings worn on the breasts of our uniforms were seemingly just ornate pieces of metal; but, to us, they represented lost friends and myriad scary flying experiences.

H. Charles Wright, Captain
U.S. Navy, Retired.



*AIR ANTI-SUBMARINE SQUADRON TWENTY TWO
UNITED STATES NAVY
ATLANTIC FLEET*



*VS-22 AIRCRAFT—HOMEWARD BOUND
IF YOU LOOK CLOSELY, THERE IS AN AIRCRAFT IN THIS BLACK NIGHT*