

# We Are Leaving the Aircraft

From: Approach Magazine, Sept. 1961

## CREW:

PILOT - Lt Robert E. Fraser

BOMBARDIER/NAVIGATOR - Ltjg Joseph A. Gauthier

GUNNER/NAVIGATOR - ADC Robert T. Fiero

PLANE CAPTAIN - AN George A. Jolly

AIRCRAFT: A3D-2 (A-3B) BuNo 138937, side no. NG-5

SQUADRON: VAH-6

CARRIER: USS Ranger (CVA-61)

LOCATION: Western Pacific, 25½ 20'N 125½ 15'E, [SEE MAP](#)

(~1435 miles NW of Guam or 270 miles SE of southern Tiawan)

CONDITIONS: Clear, 15,000 ft., 325 kias

DATE: July 6, 1961

At approximately 1300 on a clear summer day (*July 6, 1961 - Ed*) in the Western Pacific, the A3D-2 was launched on a bogie mission to take part in an Anti-Air Warfare exercise. The crew was made up of pilot, bombardier-navigator, a gunner-navigator and plane captain. Preflight inspection and launch had been normal. Nothing eventful took place during the first 2 3/4 hours of flight except for intermittent ICS cut out.

At 1545 while the A3D and two other aircraft were effecting a rendezvous over the carrier at 15,000 feet, a loud whining sound was heard. This was followed by smoke coming from the companionway under the escape hatch. Aware of a recent fatal A3D accident resulting from a fire in the companionway area, the pilot declared an emergency. When the gunner-navigator was unable to open the escape hatch manually, the pilot ordered the bombardier-navigator to blow the escape hatch open with the emergency handle and the crew to bail out.

The gunner-navigator left the aircraft followed by the plane captain and the bombardier-navigator.

The pilot unstrapped from his seat but paused in the aisle of the cockpit where he could see into the companionway. He noted that the smoke seemed to be dissipating. Weighing the evidence, he concluded that the fire was out and subsequently brought the aircraft in for a safe landing aboard the carrier--possibly the first A3D carrier landing ever made without a crewmember.

The three crewmen parachuted to the water. Two of the men were picked up by a waiting helicopter and the third by a plane guard destroyer. Here are their accounts of parachute descent and rescue.

**Gunner-Navigator:** "The pilot said over the air *mayday, mayday, fire, fire, we are getting out*. The bombardier-navigator repeated it. While this was going on, I was making last minute adjustments to my harness and replacing my oxygen mask over my face. (I was riding in the fourth seat.) The bombardier-navigator pulled the red handle, releasing the escape chute.

"I slid or rather was sucked down the chute feet first on my back. The blast of the slipstream caused by the plane's forward motion was terrific. As my head cleared the plane, air rammed up the back of my APH-5 hard hat and jammed it up over my head and

face. I would like to point out here that the nape strap on my helmet was exceptionally tight--tight to the point of causing pressure on the nape of my neck. Also, I would like to point out that the last thing I did in the aircraft was to push both Hardman fittings completely home. I feel that under no condition could I have had my APH-5 more secure on my head.

*( A chinstrap reinstalled per BACSEB 17-58A would have improved helmet retention. - Ed.)*

"As we had just disconnected the baro-lanyards from our parachutes, it was necessary to actuate the parachutes manually. At the time, it never occurred to me to delay more than a few seconds. I delayed what I thought was long enough and then reached across my chest with my right hand and pulled the D-ring. It took what I would estimate as about three seconds for the chute to blossom. I had no sensation of opening shock. If there was any, it must have been light because I distinctly remember the sound the chute made when it opened -- just a 'Whap.' At this time I decided to get my helmet back on my head where it belonged and to get rid of my oxygen mask. I had the parachute D-ring in my right hand so I tried to adjust my helmet with my left. Finally I threw the ring away and used both hands to release the mask and readjust the helmet.

"I then tried to get into the seat of the chute. Impossible. I make a fast guess as to how high I was and decided that the short distance I had to fall did not warrant the expenditure of so vast an amount of energy. In this squadron it is standard procedure for the man in the fourth seat to have a parachute without the raft installed. The raft is carried in a rack next to the seat. Upon leaving the plane I had decided against taking the raft with me as I didn't know how much strain this would place on my arms when the parachute opened.

"Outside of some minor discomfort due to hanging by the leg straps, the descent was uneventful. I watched the ships start to turn around and head towards us. I noticed many aircraft circling the area and know I had it made after all if I just didn't make some shark mad after I got in the water. I let my mind dwell too long on the shark bit and was wishing I had brought the raft along. The next time I looked down I saw I was facing the wind which was what I had decided I wanted.

"When my feet made contact with the water, I was thrown rather violently on my back and was stunned momentarily. In a few seconds I regained enough presence of mind to release the chest strap of the harness and then the leg straps. I had no difficulty releasing the chest and leg straps. I did have a little trouble with the right leg strap because I was wearing a pistol belt around my waist and it had turned and slipped down, partially covering the ejector snap. When I released the last strap I extended my hands over my head and the harness was pulled free by the chute.

"I was still on my back in the water. Inflation of the mae west was no problem. While descending I had notice another crewmember and decided to see if I could find him and possibly share his raft--if he had one. This was unnecessary--when I turned to start in what I thought was his direction I was looking directly at the helicopter. The crewman lowered the rescue seat; I crawled on it and was hoisted aboard; 1/2"

**Plane Captain:** "The gunner-navigator was the first one to bail out and I went right behind him. If there was an initial shock when I left the plane I do not recall it. As I was descending I became sick and wanted to vomit. I could see the ship and two other crewmen in their parachutes. I made several attempts to adjust myself in the parachute but I could not do it. Just before hitting the water I unbuckled my chest strap and left leg strap.

"As my feet hit the water I fell away from the chute. The wind caught it and since my right leg was still fastened I was blown and dragged through the water. I pulled my mae west toggles just as I started to sink. I attempted to cut my right leg strap, but my knife (my personal knife, not a standard survival knife) was too small to do the job. I finally worked the leg strap loose and freed myself. The water was not too choppy or cold.

"I could see several planes circling me. The TF dropped me a life raft. As I was swimming for it, I changed my course and started swimming toward the ship. As the ship neared, they started to throw some lines to me. I was too weak to pull the lines so I wrapped them around my arm and started to make my way to the ship. While I was doing this two men from the ship jumped into the water to assist me in getting aboardi½"

**Bombardier-Navigator:** "I first reached for the escape chute handle when the pilot said 'We are leaving the aircraft' but on looking aft I saw the gunner-navigator was working with his parachute harness so I delayed an instant. I switched the UHF to Guard and then reached back and pulled the escape chute handle. The escape chute blew open. As I got out of my seat to bail out I hesitated in the aisle because there were oxygen hoses and cords dangling in the escape chute. I pulled them out of the way, then put my mask hose under my left arm and place my hand near my parachute manual D-ring because the baro-lanyards had been disconnected when we started our descent list. Then I jumped. There was a 'Whoosh' and the next thing I remember it was real quiet. I looked up and saw my parachute was partially open but badly torn. I thought 'Joe, it looks like you've bought the farm this time.' There seemed to be a lot of G-force on me because I was unable to get back into the parachute seat or get my raft out. I seemed to be spinning and I became very dizzy and nauseated. About this time I blacked out. When I came to, I was lying on the deck of the helicopter and saw the helicopter chief and our gunner-navigatori½"

*Observers stated that the bombardier-navigator, the last man to leave the aircraft, descended quite rapidly and was the first of the three men to hit the water.*

**Flight Surgeon's Comments:** The reporting flight surgeon makes the following observations:

- - Although he was dazed and rotating rapidly, the bombardier-navigator functioned efficiently during the parachute descent. This is felt to be the result of his survival training.
  - The gunner-navigator did well in the survival phase except that 1) he did not take his pararaft with him when baling out and 2) he removed his life vest in the helicopter.
- - The plane captain was unable to release himself from the parachute harness rapidly.
- - None of the three men hooked his pararaft lanyard to his life vest.

## Crew Bails Out; Pilot Saves Plane

FROM: USS Ranger newspaper

An alert crew of Heavy Attack Squadron Six survived a small airborne fire and bailout and saved an A3D-2 aircraft in a series of quick decisions Thursday afternoon.

The pilot, Lt Robert "E" Fraser, remained with the aircraft and brought it safely aboard Ranger. He is the first A3D pilot to land aboard a carrier without a crew.

Ltjg Joseph A. Gauthier, bombardier/navigator, Aviation Machinist Mate Chief Robert T. Fiero, gunner/navigator, and Airman George A. Jolly, plane captain, all parachuted to safety and were rescued. They suffered minor injuries and shock.

The action took place about 10 miles astern of Ranger during a scheduled recovery. Returning from a routine mission, Lt Fraser had descended to 15 thousand feet to join up with a flight of two other A3D aircraft.

Chief Fiero, reading the checkoff list, suddenly noticed the strong smell of smoke in the cockpit. Lt Fraser asked for an immediate inspection of the companionway and ordered a bailout if conditions got worse. Using the emergency system, Ltjg Gauthier opened the escape chute doors that also lead to the equipment compartments.

Smoke billowed into the cockpit. The crew evacuated in short order. Not far behind, Lt Fraser paused at the chute. The smoke appeared to be diminishing. As it cleared away, he elected to remain with the aircraft a while longer and awaited further development.

Joining up in another A3D, Lcdr Robert Hendrickson looked over Fraser's aircraft and gave him a "thumbs up." Unable to communicate by radio, Fraser indicated with hand signals that he would stay with the aircraft and came aboard a few minutes later without further incident.

Ranger's plane guard helicopter was dispatched to the bailout scene and picked up Ltjg Gauthier and Fiero, who suffered bruises and sprains from the shock of the opening parachute and impact with the water. The USS Brinkley Bass, plane guard destroyer, picked up the third survivor, Jolly, who was highlined back aboard Ranger Friday evening. He suffered bruises and shock. The entire rescue operation only took 30 minutes.

Cause of the fire was traced to an over-heated auxiliary equipment turbine.