

MY NIGHT WITH “MAE WEST”

The true story of BuNo 142236

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December 20, 1962—a cold and windy night over the East China Sea. A chilly 70 deg F air temp and 70 deg F water temp made the combo 140 deg F enough for use of the new and improved winter flying gear—bright orange and said to be waterproof.

ZB 14 was readied to launch for a scheduled twilight trap. LCDR Dick Agnew was the pilot, AMS1 Jack Beckett was the CN, and I was the BN. LCDR Agnew's regular BN, Zane Williams, was stateside attending his father's funeral. My pilot, LT Bill Cavitt, was in NAS Atsugi picking up an A3 from rework.

We had been in port for a week (Sasebo, I think, but it was almost 40 years ago), so this was the first air ops after going back to sea. As always on the Essex 27C class carriers, the A3 traps last. The plan would give us a "pinky" landing at dusk, as if landing on the 27Cs wasn't hard enough! But A3 pilots are up to the task. LTJG Pete Wood, VA-196 LSO and safety officer with the stateroom next to mine, had reminded me of the weather conditions and saw to it that I donned the new winter survival suit for a 1730 launch.



142236 pictured here is wearing VAH-8 CAG 31 markings.

courtesy of Squadron/Signal Publications

The cat shot off the USS Bon Homme Richard was normal and the 1-hour, 15-minute flight routine. The LSO waved off the first pass for landing because the tail skag indicator was barber-poled with no cockpit approach light indicators. We recycled the gear and all indicators were normal. The second pass was low and LCDR Agnew waved this one off. The third pass was a bolter. LCDR Agnew had lined up a bit right, but the approach was good until three seconds from the ramp when he made a last-minute correction which caused us to settle. The LSO called “POWER” and

abandoned his platform. We hit the round down, sheared off the port main mount, pulled out the tail hook, but we were able to get airborne again.

We quickly learned that because our hydraulics system was out, we couldn't clean up. Also, with our fuel state, we couldn't bingo to Itazuki AFB, 187 nautical miles away.

The plan was for the carrier and plane guards to form a V with their searchlights aimed vertically for our visual reference in the dark. We were to fly up the middle of the V at 5000 feet and bail out over the BHR. LCDR Agnew reviewed bailout procedures with us and we prepared for the slide of our lives.

On the downwind leg, I blew the escape chute in prep for bail out. We smelled smoke and evacuated immediately—the carrier going north and our plane going south. (The smoke turned out to be from the 35 mm cartridges that had blown down the hatch.) I still remember looking up and back and thinking, "We'll never see ZB 14 again." Even if it hadn't crashed at sea, my thought was correct. We later learned the F3H night fighters of VF-193 had wanted to launch for practice intercepts and missile firing at our crippled bird, but were denied permission by the Air Boss who wasn't positive everyone was out of the aircraft.

After I had ceased my 50 milliseconds of skylarking, I struggled to pull up to a sitting position in the parachute harness, as we had learned in Pensacola, but I had cinched the straps too tight! Imagine that! When I hit the water, the 15-knot winds caught the chute, pulling me through the water face down. Training took over. I rolled onto my back and pulled the bottom riser to spill the air from the chute. After releasing the chute, I felt something pulling me under. Using the razor-sharp hook knife we all carried, I began to cut everything I could—the shroud lines and, unfortunately, even the lanyard for my life raft, leaving me up the creek without a raft, so to speak.

I inflated my life vest (the Mae West style) to get high in the water and started firing tracers from my Navy issue .38 revolver. I carried nothing but tracers as I'd never believed a .38 would hold off the ChiCom horde if I went down on a mission. It was a six-foot sea state, so I could see the ships as the wave peaked, but they would have a hard time seeing me with only my head and shoulders above the water. Despite the new high-intensity strobe lights (high tech for the day), the USS Robinson (a new DDG class destroyer) later said they had located us when their searchlights illuminated the reflective tape on our helmets.

Thirty-seven minutes later a whaleboat from the Robinson picked AMS1 Beckett and me up, a little cold and wet, but none the worse for wear. Beckett was in his life raft, as was LCDR Angew who had been picked up by a second whalebo

at. Both were pretty cold from the wind chill. Due to misinformation on the new survival suits that were supposed to keep us dry, I was actually pretty comfortable—the suit had filled up with water, and like today’s scuba gear, the wet-suit effect had kept me warm.

The next day we were heloed back to the BHR. The crew of the Robinson had been great hosts for my one and only stay on a "can." I also can't say enough about the plane guards in general that had done their jobs superbly, as had the carrier, making a “happy ending” for the story of 142236.