The Case of the Blind Pilot

By COMDR. HARRY A. BURNS, USN

Stunned and bleeding, Ken Schechter was alone in his Skyraider over North Korea. He couldn’t even see, but he flew back, with the help of a guardian angel from the Yellow Devil Squadron. The true story of a combat miracle.

AT SEA OFF KOREA.

The members of the Yellow Devil Squadron from the carrier USS Valley Forge were over the target, pressing home their attack on the communist marshaling yards, paying no attention to the heavy anti-aircraft fire around them—as is customary in such circumstances. Then Skyraider pilot Lt. (jg) Howard Thayer, of Los Angeles, heard a scream over his radio circuit: “I’m blind! For God’s sake, help me; I’m blind!”

Lieutenant Thayer looked around and above for any plane trailing smoke or obviously in trouble. High above him at ten o’clock there was another Skyraider climbing straight for the solid overcast at 10,000 feet. It didn’t make sense—and young Thayer made a prompt decision. His duty was to go to the rescue of that blinded fellow pilot somehow. “Plane in trouble, rock your wings,” he called. “Plane in trouble, rock your wings.”

For a second or so, the other plane headed unheeding toward the overcast. Then a definite motion—back and forth, again and again.

But still that plane climbed for the overcast. A few more hundred feet and it would be too late. The minute that any plane entered that cloud bank he’d be lost for sure. If the guy—whoever he was—was badly hurt and got lost in that pea-soup scud up above, it was good-by.

“Put your nose down—put your nose down,” Thayer called over the circuit. “Push over. I’m coming up.”

Thayer managed to keep his voice calm, in spite of the pounding of his heart. He could see how close it was going to be. The other guy, blinded, hurt and unconscious of where he was, might react and he might not. Thayer gunned his plane and started to climb with full throttle on. He glanced at the plane above. No smoke trailing astern to indicate fire. But still it climbed. Now the wounded pilot was about in the deadly cloud bank.

“This is Thayer—this is Thayer!” the rescuing pilot barked sharply into his mike. “Put your nose down quick! Get it over!”

This time the message reached the wounded pilot, Ens. Ken Schechter, of Los Angeles. At 1200 feet over Wonsang-ni in North Korea an enemy anti-aircraft shell had shattered the cockpit of his Skyraider. He was knocked unconscious. Instinct made him pull back on his stick—his dive-bomber shivered at the bottom of its arc and began a steep climb. From then on, Schechter had been unmindful of anything except the red ooziness of his face and head, and the fearful pounding in the back of his neck. Stunned, blinded, bleeding, hurtling through the air at more than 200 miles per hour in a plane he couldn’t see to control, Ken Schechter almost—but not quite—turned in his spikes and called it a day.

The name “Thayer” in the call from the other pilot came through to Schechter at the vital psychological moment. Thank God, if there was anyone who could pull him through this thing it was Howie Thayer—his roommate on the Valley Forge.

Schechter, dimly conscious now, although still dazed, pushed the stick forward. From the seat of his pants and the angle of his body, he knew the nose was over and that he was headed earthward. At what angle, though, he couldn’t tell. From now on, that would be up to Thayer. Thayer would tell him what to do and when.

“You’re doing all right now,” he heard Thayer say calmly. “Pull back a little; we can level off now.”

Schechter complied, relying on his sense of gravity feel to tell him when he was about level.

Thayer was now flying about 100 feet off the battered plane’s starboard quarter. He saw that the cockpit was almost completely blown away. The areas both in front and

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"The winner and new flyweight champion..."

THE SATURDAY EVENING POST
"Get me down, Thayer." There was no doubting the frantic plea this time. It wasn't repeated, but Thayer heard enough to know what must have been said.

"Roger. We're approaching Wonsan now. Get ready to bail out."

"Negative. Negative. Not gonna bail out. Get me down." The words were hard and preservative, though half drowned out by the engine noise and the distortion caused by wind rushing by the open mike.

"Where are we, Thayer?" the pilot asked.

"I am not sighted. Schechter didn't want to jump. Floating down to a choppy mass of cold water was a Navy pilot's nightmare at any time, even under the best of conditions. To try it with no eyesight and with bleeding wounds was taking too much of a chance.

"Maybe the friendly ships bombarding Wonsan wouldn't see him or couldn't get to him in time. Maybe he would hit the water too fast and not get clear of his parachute straps. No. He would not take the chance. He decided to find a landing field and coach down. He thought, he kept scanning the shore line ahead for signs of a cruiser or battleship. A few minutes later he saw it—an American cruiser blazing away at communist troops ashore. Wonsan fell.

"We're at the battle line now, Ken. Will you head for Geronimo. Hold on, boy.

"Geronimo was the code name for an American airbase about thirty miles south of the Line."

"Can you see me, Ken? Will you head for Geronimo. Over."

"Roger." Schechter's voice was tired and faint.

"Roger. Of course."

"Get me down, you miserable ape, or you'll have to inventory my gear."

"The pilot would not hear him. He had other things to do. The pilot took his place on the nose of the plane and flew it like a kite."

"Roger. Gear up."

"The crucial moments were ahead. The right words had to come automatically. Orders had to be given correctly, understood and carried out perfectly. One slip anywhere along the line and it was all over.

"With desperate faith in his own judgment, Thayer talked quietly to his wounded friend. Each movement, every required action, was ordered, and its execution carefully checked by Thayer as the two planes continued their turn and made their approach to the narrow, short runway. Schechter, for all his loss of blood, handled his plane beautifully. Spare energy and strength came from some reservoir. He would not have the chance to use them."

"Roger. Gear up."

"We're landing. Hundred yards to run."

"Roger. We're heading straight. Hundred yards to run."

"Roger. We're going down. Push your nose over, drop your right wing."

He watched anxiously to see Schechter's response. It was O.K. He was still reacting to orders.

"Clear spot ahead became more visible. No plane, no land, only the sea ahead."

"Jersey Bounce" they called it once. That was the old name. No planes on it, but there were a few small buildings left standing, probably with a skeleton crew as caretakers. The runway there was a north-south affair—short and graveled. He saw a few men and two or three men looking at them as they approached the field from the east.

"We're approaching Jersey Bounce, Ken. Will make a two zero turn and set you down."

"Roger. Let's go," Schechter said, then repeated it. He was almost confident. His words were not fast—but fast for complete clarity. He was ready to try it, not remembering anything about Jersey Bounce at all. Just a name from somewhere, sometime. His strength was ebbing.

"Thayer looked at the short, unpaved runway and then at the shot-up plane beside him. Should they try it or gamble on Schechter's holding on to consciousness for a while longer? He realized..."

"Left wing down slowly, nose over easy. Little more," Thayer said coolly. "Wonsan's falling."

The planes banked sharply and started their turn through 270 degrees toward the beginning of the runway.

"Gear down."

"To hell with that!" Schechter said, his voice now shrill.

"Thayer cursed himself and was thankful that, blind and hurt, Ken Schechter had the presence of mind to remember that, in an emergency such as this, it is safer to land on your belly, with wheels unlowered, than in the conventional wheels-down manner. It lowered the chances of ripping off a leg or dislocating a shoulder."

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Admiral Frederick William McMahon, to the newest and greenest plane pusher, were mighty proud of him. And equally proud of Schechter. All through the ordeal, the Air Operations radio speaker had been tuned in on the transmission between the two pilots. As the word spread, other pilots, senior staff officers and enlisted personnel found all manner of excuses to enter AirOps and listen in to the drama going on in the air, miles away. The transcription machine had been turned on and a record had been made of the voice transmissions between the two pilots. That night it was to be played over the intraship radio system so that all 3000 of the Valley Forge crewmen and air personnel could hear and understand what had gone on.

In the meantime, Schechter was being transported by helicopter from Jersey Bounce to Geronimo. On arrival there, and after an examination and first aid by the doctors, it was decided that he required the services of a trained eye surgeon and hospital facilities. So, after the more easily removable pieces of shell had been taken from his face, neck and scalp, and after a dose of morphine had been administered to relieve the intense pain which had developed by now, he was placed in an R5D and flown south to Pusan. By three o'clock in the afternoon he had been transferred to the naval hospital ship Consolation in Pusan Harbor for radical surgery and treatment. Sharp shell fragments had pierced both eyes. Long weeks of recuperation still lie ahead. The left eye, after treatment, has healed well enough so that Schechter can see objects dimly and fuzzily. His right eye is sighted at the moment, its future a question mark.

When some of his squadron mates visited Schechter at the hospital in Yokosuka, Japan, before he was flown back to the States for further treatment, he seemed optimistic about the future.

"Tell those guys I'm lucky to be alive, and I know it. Anybody who moans about anything is nuts."

THE END