

# Lt. Shane Osborn: Looking at a Miracle

*“Standing in the sweltering heat of the Lingshui taxi ramp, I realized I was looking at a miracle!”* —Lt. Shane Osborn

By Jim Turnbull

On 1 April 2001, 26-year-old Lieutenant Shane Osborn was the aircraft and mission commander of an EP-3E Aries II (BuNo 156511) flying a routine reconnaissance mission off the coast of China. His squadron, the *World Watchers* of Fleet Air Reconnaissance Squadron (VQ) 1, had been flying off the Chinese coast for years. On this day, the mission would change Lt. Osborn’s life forever and throw him and his 23-person crew into the center of a tense international standoff.

This mission began like many others with a predawn launch from Kadena Air Base, Okinawa, Japan. During the nine-hour flight, the aircraft was scheduled to head down the Asian coast to the South China Sea to conduct a signals intelligence gathering mission in international airspace northeast of the Chinese island of Hainan and north of the Philippines.

Osborn and his crew knew they would be intercepted once Chinese radar identified them and the Chinese would send up a pair of J-8 Finback fighters to check out the EP-3E. These intercepts had been going on for some time, but lately the Chinese had been much more aggressive—regularly coming within 50 feet of the EP-3Es before the J-8 pilot would blast away, rocking the much slower Navy planes with jet wash. Navy crews had complained about this dangerous flying, but the close intercepts continued.

Lt. Osborn’s crew was 10 minutes from completing their mission and heading back to Japan when their aircraft was intercepted at 22,500 feet while cruising at 180 knots. The two J-8s initially began a loose trail



**Above, the VQ-1 EP-3E Aries II was severely damaged when struck by a Chinese J-8 fighter on 1 April 2001. Lt. Shane Osborn struggled to regain control of the crippled aircraft and landed at Hainan Island, China, where the crew was taken captive by the Chinese government.**

formation but quickly changed tactics and closed on the EP-3E from the rear at the seven o’clock position.

Then, one J-8 drew close to the EP-3E’s left wing, at times just 10 feet away. The Finback fell off but returned a few moments later from the rear and closed quickly. Inside the EP-3E’s left wing and traveling faster than the Navy plane, the Chinese pilot attempted to slow his aircraft by pulling up. The J-8 pitched upward steeply, causing the fighter’s fuselage to impact with the spinning blades of the EP-3E’s number 1 engine.

The propeller cut the J-8 virtually in half. The fighter’s nose section cartwheeled upward, smashing into the EP-3E’s nose and tearing off the radome. The remainder of the Finback’s fuselage continued beneath Osborn’s plane, scraping the bottom but ducking under the starboard wing and narrowly missing the propellers of engines 3 and 4. A shower of debris struck the EP-3E and it immediately snap-rolled left before going into a near inverted dive.

Looking at the South China Sea through the windscreen, Osborn and the flight crew had little time to react. The plane's dive angle steepened despite his holding the yoke vertical full right while jamming his boot on the right rudder pedal. Fighting to regain control of the crippled plane, Osborn knew the lives of the crew hung in the balance. The plane had dropped 8,000 feet in 30 seconds and it fell another 6,000 feet before the crew finally had the EP-3E's nose up and wings level.

Not knowing how much longer the battered plane would stay together, Lt. Osborn called for the crew to prepare to bail out. They donned parachutes and the emergency plan was set in motion. Sensitive information and equipment needed to be destroyed should the plane be forced down in unfriendly territory. Initially, that seemed an unlikely possibility. Osborn's plane was flying in international airspace over the South China Sea and was not close to land.

Ditching the plane was another option but was likely to cost lives. The only real chance of survival rested with getting the plane on the nearest piece of land with a runway, which happened to be Lingshui military base on Hainan Island.

Heading toward the island, the crew was hard at work destroying intelligence equipment and documents while preparing for an emergency landing. There was no response to repeated mayday distress calls to the Lingshui airfield. Still, the VQ-1 crew pressed on and set up for landing. With tons of jet fuel still aboard, Osborn knew he'd be setting the plane down at an airspeed close to 180 knots.

Lt. Osborn and the aircrew did manage to get the plane safely on the ground, with no crew injuries. However, a joyous celebration quickly gave way to harsh reality: they were in China.

Aviation writer Jim Turnbull interviewed Osborn about his experience.



**Turnbull:** It's been about two years since your EP-3E was forced to land in China. What have you been up to since the incident?

**Osborn:** At first there was plenty of debriefing, then I was approached with the idea for a book about the incident. While the book was being written, I qualified as a VQ-1 instructor pilot and completed a squadron detachment to the Middle East. Returning in early 2002, the book had come out and there were promotions associated with it. In July of last year, I reported to Training Squadron (VT) 10 at NAS Pensacola, Fla., as a flight instructor.

Your book, *Born to Fly*, provides great detail surrounding the forced landing and subsequent period of detention. It also looks at your life and your early interest in flying. What made you decide to write it?

Book companies had approached the Navy and it was OK'd. When I got involved, I wanted to be sure the whole story was told, and it had to have the support of the Navy. Most importantly, I felt the book would be an effective recruitment tool.

Take us back to the immediate aftermath of the collision—your thoughts as you tried to regain control and then eventually landed on Hainan Island, alive.

After the J-8 hit us, we snap-rolled right away and went into an inverted dive. I thought we were dead, no question! There was a sick acceptance. We were upside down for 8,000 feet before we were able to regain any control. It was plenty of time to consider death.

After that, my thoughts centered on whether the plane would hold together long enough for us to consider our options. I thought that maybe some guys could bail out and survive to tell the story, but we certainly were not all going to survive. It was a horrible feeling. Ditching the plane would kill everyone. I knew it wasn't going to hold together indefinitely. I had to find a place to land immediately.

On our approach to Lingshui air base, I didn't even know if we had nose gear because of the damage to the

front of the plane. When we got “three down and locked” on our final approach, I knew we’d live. However, we were still overweight (109,000 pounds), had no flaps and were way over the maximum no-flap landing speed. When we stopped the plane, my first thought was “I just can’t believe we’re alive!”

**You repeatedly radioed the Chinese as you approached Hainan Island. Why do you think they failed to respond to your emergency distress calls?**

They didn’t have time to go through the chain of command to make the decision to give us permission to land.

**What happened to the second J-8?**

We later learned that he followed us to the airfield, although we were too preoccupied keeping our plane in the air to notice. We now know the J-8 did ask for permission to shoot us down once we entered Chinese air space. The request was denied.

**You and your crew were held by the Chinese for 11 days. Describe your period of detention and your greatest source of strength while you were held prisoner.**

There were peaks and valleys while we were being held. I was separated from my crew, although we all managed to get together for meals. I was scared. My life was threatened because I was accused of being a spy. Regularly, I was interrogated while I sat on a wooden chair for seven hours at a time.

Their favorite tactic was sleep deprivation. They wouldn’t let me sleep and wanted me to confess to being on a spy mission. They also wanted us to accept full responsibility for the collision. We refused. I spent long hours alone. I prayed and thought about childhood memories of growing up in Nebraska.

**After several days of being held by the Chinese, you had the chance to return to your plane to inspect it. What were your impressions?**

I realized I was looking at a miracle. There was so much more wrong with the plane than I previously knew—open gashes in the aileron and left wing, the number 3 engine was badly damaged by shrapnel and an



**Above, before the collision, Chinese J-8 Finback fighters had become more aggressive in their intercepts of U.S. reconnaissance flights in international airspace. The collision severely damaged the propeller of the number 1 engine, shown below with Lt. R. D. Burley, a VQ-1 pilot. Bottom, a closeup of one of the prop blades shows some of the damage.**

elevator was bent. The nose gear door and fuselage bottom were marked by red paint from the J-8.

After we were released by the Chinese and Lockheed Martin personnel got a look, they found more damage. When they were dismantling the plane for shipment back to the States, they removed a section of high-frequency radio antenna wire that had partially broken off and wrapped itself around the left horizontal stabilizer. When they took the wire off, the port



elevator fell to the ground. It had been held on only by the wire!

**Has your forced landing in China given you additional perspective as a flight instructor?**

No doubt. We are all playing for the same team here. At VT-10 we have 50 to 60 students and they need the same high-level training that I got. My flight training helped me to survive that incident.

**In your book, it’s clear that you thought a lot of the training on T-34C Turbo-Mentors that you received from Lt. Jeff Nelson at NAS Corpus Christi, Texas. Have you had a chance to talk since the incident?**

We’ve talked several times. He told me that he was proud of me. He said the “tough love” paid off.

**Some people have suggested that perhaps you could have nursed your plane to a landing in either the Philippines or Vietnam rather than have it fall into**

Chinese hands. What is your reaction to that?

People are entitled to their opinion. Those people weren't facing this critical situation. The reality is my aircraft was badly damaged and barely under control. I knew it might easily come apart if we didn't land immediately. As it was, it took us half an hour to get to Hainan Island. Later, once I got the chance to inspect it on the ground, I just couldn't believe we survived. That plane was damaged beyond anything I might have imagined. We just didn't have the luxury of time to gradually get the plane to another, more distant location. The risk of the plane coming apart or becoming uncontrollable again was too great.



Senior Airman Joseph Lozada

Left, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Henry H. Shelton presents awards to Lt. Osborn and his crew in 2001. Above, Lt. Osborn completed his tour with VQ-1 and went on to become a flight instructor with Training Squadron 10. Below, after the damaged EP-3E was dismantled and returned to the United States, it was rebuilt and flew for the first time on 15 November 2002.



The forced landing dominated world news for almost two weeks. Looking back, what impact has it had on you as a person and as an aviator?

As a person, I appreciate things much more. It was a life-changing situation. I sure don't take things for granted anymore. No one really knows how they'll react in a situation like that. As a pilot, I don't think I fly any differently but I'm much more of a control freak.

You were awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross in recognition of your flying skills in getting your EP-3E safely on the ground. How do you feel about receiving the DFC?

I honestly feel the DFC goes to the crew. They did an incredible job under some unbelievable conditions. It is a great honor for me and my crew.

After 11 days of tense negotiations with the Chinese, the U.S. government secured the release of Lt. Osborn and his crew, who returned to NAS Whidbey Island, Wash., on 16 April 2001. The Chinese refused to allow the EP-3E to be repaired and flown off the island, but agreed to allow technicians from Lockheed Martin to travel to Hainan Island to dismantle the plane.

Beginning in June 2001, Lockheed Martin officials took the plane apart and loaded it on board two Russian Antonov-124 cargo jets to be flown to Kadena Air Base, Japan. On 5 July, the dismantled EP-3E arrived at Dobbins Air Force Base next to Lockheed Martin's facility in Marietta, Ga. On 15 November 2002, the completely rebuilt EP-3E made its first test flight, and it is scheduled to return to fleet service later this year. ✈

Mr. Turnbull is a journalist specializing in Navy and Coast Guard aviation.