

Blind and Alone Over North Korea

By Kenneth A. Schechter

I was blind, in pain, bleeding profusely and very much alone. At the controls of my A-1 Skyraider attack plane over Wongsang-ni, North Korea, I was climbing toward a solid overcast at 10,000 feet—from which there might be no return.

It was 22 March 1952 and I was just 22 years old. Earlier that day, dawn found me on the flight deck of *Valley Forge* (CV 45) in the Sea of Japan, warming up my Skyraider. As a pilot in Fighter Squadron 194, the *Yellow Devils*, I was the standby in case one of the eight planes scheduled for the morning's flight became inoperative. When Charlie Brown's plane lost its hydraulic system, I was launched in his place. It was my 27th bombing mission in North Korea. The targets were enemy marshaling yards, railroad tracks and other transportation infrastructure.

On the ninth of my planned 15 bomb runs, at 1,200 feet, an enemy antiaircraft shell exploded in the cockpit. Instinctively, I pulled back on the stick to gain altitude. Then I passed out. When I came to a short time later, I couldn't see a thing. There was stinging agony in my face and throbbing in my head. I felt for my upper lip. It was almost severed from the rest of my face.

I called out over the radio through my lip mike (which miraculously still worked), "I'm blind! For God's sake, help me! I'm blind!"

Lieutenant (jg) Howard Thayer, in his own Skyraider nearby, heard the distress call. He saw my plane heading straight toward the heavy overcast. He knew that if I entered those clouds no one would be able to help me.

He called out, "Plane in trouble, rock your wings. Plane in trouble, rock your wings." I did so. Then came the order, "Put your nose down! Put your nose down! Push over. I'm coming up."

Above, as represented by these two A-1 Skyraiders, Ltjg. Thayer flew in close formation to his blinded squadronmate and talked him down to a safe landing following a mission over North Korea. Below, the VF-194 pilots flew from *Valley Forge* (CV 45), shown here operating in heavy seas on 21 March 1952, the day before Ensign Schechter's harrowing flight.





Above, pilots gather in the junior officers' bunk room aboard *Valley Forge* in early 1952, left to right: Ens. Bob Smith, VF-52; Ens. Joe Akagi, VF-194; Ens. Ken Schechter, VF-194; Ens. Dick Kaufman, VF-194; Ens. Charlie Brown, VF-194; Ens. Dick Haynes, VF-52; and Ltjg. Howard Thayer, VF-194.

Again, I did as he said and pushed the stick forward. He climbed and flew alongside my plane and radioed, "This is Thayer. This is Thayer. Put your nose over further."

I complied. Howie Thayer was my roommate on *Valley Forge*. Hearing his name and his voice gave me just the psychological boost I needed. He continued, "You're doing all right. Pull back a little. We can level off now."

Thayer could see that the canopy of my plane was blown away and that my face was a bleeding mess. The crimson stain on the fuselage behind the cockpit turned dark and blended with the Navy blue of the Skyraider as the blood dried. He was amazed I was still alive.

Without the canopy, the 200 mile per hour slipstream and unmuffled engine noise made sending and receiving radio transmissions exceptionally difficult. Despite these obstacles, I began to think clearly in my moments of consciousness and began to try to help myself. I

managed to pour water from my canteen over my face. For a fleeting instant there was a sight of the instrument panel, which disappeared immediately. I was blind again.

Howard kept up a stream of conversation, "We're headed south, Ken. We're heading for Wonsan [a port and prime target on the Sea of Japan]. Not too long."

The throbbing in my head was getting worse and the blood running down my throat nauseated me. I hurt, but was unable to get the morphine from my first aid kit. I radioed, "Get me down, Howie!"

"Roger. We're approaching Wonsan. Get ready to bail out." To which I replied, "Negative! Negative! Not going to bail out." All too often our pilots had drowned or died of exposure after their planes had been crippled by enemy antiaircraft fire and they ditched the aircraft or bailed out into the frigid waters of the Sea of Japan. My wingman, Lieutenant Commander Tom Pugh, had been killed in just this way on our second mission. In my case, I would have had to successfully evacuate the Skyraider and enter the water blind, with the probability of a tangled parachute harness and with my rubber immersion suit pierced by shell fragments and unable to offer protection from the freezing ocean. To my mind, bailing out meant certain death.

I would not bail out. Howie understood my decision. He would get me back behind the front lines into friendly territory—or I would die in the attempt. We turned and headed south.

Thirty miles behind the front lines, on the coast, was a Marine airfield designated K-18.

This was our destination. I wasn't sure whether I could make it that far as I kept drifting in and out of consciousness. Then Howard spotted a cruiser shelling enemy positions and knew that this was the bomb line. South of the bomb line was friendly territory. The instructions continued, "We're at the bomb line, Ken. We'll head for K-18. Hold on, Ken. Can you hear me, Ken? Will head for K-18. Over."

"Roger. Let's try." It was an effort to speak.

"Can you make it, Ken?"

"Get me down, you miserable s.o.b., or you'll have to inventory my gear!" (In case of an aviator's death, a shipmate must inventory his personal belongings before they are shipped home—not a welcome chore. Howard and I had designated each other for this function.)

I continued to follow Thayer's directions, but he could see that my head kept flopping down from time to time and he doubted I could make it to K-18, so he decided to get me down right away.

Immediately behind the front lines was a 2,000-foot deserted dirt airstrip named “Jersey Bounce” that the Army used for its light planes performing artillery spotting. Thayer decided to have me land there. “Ken, we’re going down. Push your nose over, drop your right wing. We’re approaching ‘Jersey Bounce.’ We’ll make a 270-degree turn and set you down.”

“Roger, Howie, let’s go,” I replied. He said, “left wing down slowly, nose over easy. A little more. Put your landing gear down.”

“To hell with that!” was my instantaneous reply. I had seen this field on earlier missions and could picture it in my mind’s eye. It was rough and short and with wheels down, too many things could go wrong. It was much safer to land on my belly. “Roger, gear up,” Thayer concurred. This was one time when we wouldn’t follow the checklist.

Ahead lay the most critical part of the flight—landing, a complex maneuver requiring precision and skill. As challenging as flying wounded and blind had been up to now, a sightless landing on a tiny dirt strip would be infinitely more difficult. One slip would result in disaster.

From his plane, flying 25 feet away from mine and duplicating my maneuvers, Howard’s voice was cool and confident, but the underlying tension was palpable, “We’re heading straight. Flaps down. Hundred yards to the runway. You’re 50 feet off the ground. Pull back a little. Easy. Easy. That’s good. You’re level. You’re O.K. You’re O.K. Thirty feet off the ground. You’re O.K. You’re over the runway. Twenty feet. Kill it a little. You’re setting down. O.K. O.K. O.K. Cut!”

The shock wasn’t nearly as bad as I expected. Some 45 minutes after the shell blew up in my cockpit, my plane hit the ground, lurched momentarily and skidded to a stop in one piece. A perfect landing. No fire. No pain, no strain. The best landing I ever made.

Thayer said elatedly, “You’re on the ground, Ken.”

After cutting the switches, I clumsily climbed out of the cockpit. Almost immediately an Army Jeep with two men came, picked me up and took me to a shack on the edge of the field. From there, a helicopter flew me to the



Above, during his hospital convalescence, Ens. Schechter, right, traveled to NAS North Island for a reunion with Ltjg. Thayer after *Valley Forge* returned to California. With Thayer’s assistance, Schechter had safely landed on a tiny dirt strip behind the front lines in North Korea, and was medevaced by a Marine helicopter to the K-18 airfield to the south. Right, this rare photo shows Ens. Schechter waiting to be airlifted from K-18 to Pusan and the hospital ship *Consolation*.



K-18 airfield where doctors at the field hospital started to patch me up and give me painkillers.

Thayer flew back to the carrier. I found out later that when he landed, a crowd was there to greet and congratulate him. He wondered how they knew what had happened and was told that most of our transmissions had been picked up on *Valley Forge*. They had recorded them and played them back for the crew that night.

Meanwhile back at the Marine airfield, the doctors felt I needed more expert medical care than they could offer, so I was transported to the Navy hospital ship *Consolation* (AH 15) where I underwent immediate surgery. Both of my eyes were bandaged for two weeks, during which time I wasn’t sure if I would ever see again.

But the possibility of a lifetime of blindness was a minor issue compared to just being alive. Eventually, however, I regained sight in my left eye. My career as a Navy carrier pilot was over. My life was not—because



although I was blind that day over North Korea, I was not really alone. Howard Thayer had been my eyes. Together, we'd created a miracle. Today, still living on "borrowed time," I am thankful for every moment of every day.

Epilogue

Howard Thayer made the Navy his career. In January 1961, while flying a night mission in an A-4 Skyhawk from a carrier in the Mediterranean Sea, both he and his squadron commander flew into the water while on landing approach. Their remains were

never recovered. Thayer was survived by his wife and three small children.

The plane that Ken Schechter landed at "Jersey Bounce" was jacked up, given a new propeller, flown back to *Valley Forge* for repairs and returned to service. Ken and Howard's story became the basis for the 1953 MGM movie, *Men of the Fighting Lady*. Ken was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross on the flight deck of *Constellation* (CV 64) at NAS North Island, Calif., on 28 June 1995. "Blind and Alone Over North Korea" was originally published in *Chicken Soup for the Veteran's Soul* in May 2001. ✈