

Dropped From The Sky - Post WWII Fighter Wrecks

by Adam M. Grohman

At 10,000 feet the United States Navy pilot realized that his engine had shut down. Below him the landscape was littered with buildings and civilians. He had to make a decision: jump from the Hellcat fighter and parachute to safety or attempt to land the lumbering aircraft in an uninhabited area. The Navy pilot chose to maneuver his single-engine fighter plane to the ground. He looked out at the horizon and saw the beach below him. He reluctantly began his forced descent to earth relying on his flight training and raw courage.

One of twelve aircraft in a flight from Floyd Bennett Field, the Hellcat was conducting a Naval Reserve practice flight. Schwartzman, a Bronx native, maneuvered the plane towards Long Beach, Long Island. With tempered coolness and confidence, Schwartzman put the Hellcat on the deck in the shallow waters of the Atlantic Ocean. Once the

aircraft came to a stop in the shallow water, Schwartzman pushed back the canopy and jumped into the surf. Wading ashore, he realized that he had been very lucky. March 8, 1947 would forever be etched into his memory as the day he almost died.

Though the second world war was over, the post-war years saw continued aviation training for United States Navy and Army Air Corps (later U.S. Air Force) pilots. Constant training flights and practice drills resulted in several accidents. Some pilots, like Schwartzman, were able to escape from their harrowing adventures. On May 21, 1947, Army Air Corps Lieutenant Hubert W. Gainer was flying a P-47 Thunderbolt from Maxwell Field at Montgomery, Alabama headed for Mitchell Field, Long Island. He had left from Howell Field in the Panama Canal Zone the previous day on his cross-country navigational flight. Outside of Washington, D.C., Lieutenant Gainer requested permission to drop to 5,000 feet because of fog. Permission was granted, but as he neared Mitchell Field, he found that the fog that had hampered his flight over the nation's capital now diminished his likelihood of landing safely on Long Island.

The fog blocked any possible landing opportunity for the pilot. He made several passes at area airports but was unable to attempt any safe landing approaches. As the sun fell, the instruments in the cockpit, with the exception of his lighted compass, failed. He began utilizing his hand-held flashlight to see his instrument dials and fuel capacity indicators as day turned into night. The control tower personnel at



F4-U Corsair

Mitchell Field recommended that Lieutenant Gainer head for Fort Dix. When he reached where the airfield at Fort Dix was supposed to be, he realized that there was no break in the fog bank. His Thunderbolt was dangerously low on fuel and he decided to head back to

Mitchell Field for one last attempt. Once over Mitchell Field, he remained in radio communication with the Flying Safety Officer. Calmly, Gainer



P-47 Thunderbolt

requested a compass heading that would allow him to fly his fighter out towards the Atlantic Ocean. Deciding not to drop his extra fuel tanks for fear of their hitting the heavily populated area below, he began flying south by east. Dropping the tanks would have produced less drag on the aircraft, but if he jettisoned the tanks, they likely would have landed on land, possibly causing damage or death. Instead Gainer flew his empty fighter out to sea. Ten minutes later, he radioed Mitchell Field that he was going over the side into the blackness of the unknown. The P-47 Thunderbolt rumbled into the night. Eventually running out of fuel, the aircraft fell from the sky crashing into the sea, its remains sinking into the darkness of the deep.

Immediately, a Coast Guard search was commenced. Gainer had parachuted safely from the Thunderbolt but was not yet clear of danger. Once he splashed down into the Atlantic, he struggled for twenty-five minutes as the lines of his parachute entangled him like a

fly in a spider web. Finally clearing himself from the shrouds of his parachute, Gainer was able to get his life raft free and inflated. Gainer, exhausted and wet, climbed into the raft to await rescue. But the same fog that had hindered his landing also complicated his rescue. As rain fell and the life raft bobbed in the ocean, he saw search lights from Coast Guard assets out of Atlantic Beach, but unfortunately, the Coast Guardsmen were unable to find the downed aviator. He remained in his life raft.

By the next morning, Lieutenant Gainer could see shore. He paddled his raft towards the beach. In the surf zone, the raft was swamped, throwing Gainer into the water. After a few minutes, he stumbled up onto the beach, sighting a row of cottages on the bluff. He walked up to one of the little houses where he thought he had seen a curtain move. After tapping on the window and identifying himself to the occupants, the cold, wet and disheveled pilot was given a hot breakfast. They contacted Mitchell Field and soon an ambulance arrived to take him to the base hospital. Gainer had survived having washed ashore at Breezy Point in Far Rockaway. Other aviators would not be as lucky.

On January 22, 1949, Lieutenant Alfred Morse Pratt was flying a F4-U Corsair in a seven-plane formation when his aircraft fell from its ranks and began a tight spiral towards

earth. As the craft sped towards the ground, fellow pilots observed part of the pilot's parachute open. But the parachute had caught on the tail assembly of the Corsair. As the plane crashed into the marsh six miles east of Jones Beach and a half mile north of the Ocean

Parkway, the pilot was pinned under the wreckage. The aircraft burst into flames. The decorated World War II veteran did not survive.

Though the war was over, training continued. Pilots continued to don their flight gear and launch their aircraft into the unknown. Most of the pilots returned to base, while others perished during their training duties. Aircraft crashes have occurred ever since man first began defying gravity. In the case of these post-war wrecks and others, it is interesting to think that while many of the aircraft were salvaged, some were never located or recovered. These aircraft, once gleaming fighters and training craft for the Navy and Army Air Corps, remain scattered deep along the dark bottom of the Atlantic Ocean near shore, in our waters.



F6F Hellcat