

# Miracle Landing Off Korea

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**On September 17, 1950, Ed Jackson's F9F-2 of VF-112 approaches USS**

For the men who shipped out on the first U.S. Navy aircraft carriers hastily dispatched to the Korean War, the summer of 1950 brought rapid adjustment to combat conditions, marred by flight deck mishaps and mounting casualties. It was an especially trying time for jet pilots learning to operate from straight-deck carriers that had been designed for prop planes. Amid these daily travails, a few feats of bravery and perseverance under the direst circumstances stood out, providing a measure of redemption for carrier crews. A remarkable example of this occurred that September, when VF-112 Ensign Edward D. Jackson Jr., flying from Philippine Sea, was injured during a mission near Seoul.

Jackson, 25, was a graduate of the Naval Aviation College Program (NACP) at the University of South Carolina. A strapping 6 feet tall and 195 pounds, he'd played tight end for the Gamecocks and later, during preflight instruction in Chapel Hill, N.C., joined an undefeated Navy football squad coached by Lt. Cmdr. Paul "Bear" Bryant. After advanced training in F4U-4 Corsairs, Jackson transitioned to F8F-2 Bearcats and eventually to F9F-2 Panthers with VF-112.

On September 17, 1950, Jackson was leading a section dispatched to strafe an airfield near North Korea's capital, Pyongyang. Flying on his wing that day was Ensign Dayl E. Crow, another NACP aviator, who'd just turned 22. Newly graduated from advanced jet training,

Crow had joined VF-112 in January 1950 and was the squadron's "nugget"—inexperienced and learning under very high-stakes conditions.

The Pyongyang airfield turned out to be little more than a grassy strip littered with burned and shattered Soviet-built aircraft. For Jackson and Crow the hunting was somewhat better back along the rail line to Seoul, where they strafed a locomotive, setting it afire. But as the two Panthers swung north around Seoul's outskirts and started down the Han River toward the Yellow Sea, Jackson spotted something promising. A string of small boats—perhaps 75 in all—was crossing the Han, south to north. Concerned they might hold refugees, Jackson dipped to 200 feet to have a look. Almost at once he heard the distinct pop of small-arms volleys; many of the "passengers" were aiming rifles skyward while others dived overboard.

Crow followed Jackson as he strafed, and their 20mm cannon rounds splintered the boats. They were met with only small-arms fire, but while the North Koreans lacked effective anti-aircraft defenses, they didn't lack ingenuity. As he reached the last line of boats, flying barely 50 feet off the deck, Jackson caught sight of a man kneeling on the river's south bank and aiming a rifle. Jackson decided to ignore him, but as he looked forward he caught "just a whisker" of something dead ahead in the sky. There was a roar, a flash and then oblivion.

Jackson had hit an aerial booby trap—steel cables strung across the Han to "clothesline" low-flying planes. The nose of his Panther snapped the cables like twine, but the whipsawing cable strands caught his starboard wing, shredded the wingtip tank and snapped across the canopy, punching out the windscreen and side panels. The impact dislodged Jackson's goggles (he wasn't wearing his oxygen mask), and shards of Plexiglas cut deeply into his face. His nose and eyebrows were split open, and his left cheek was torn to the bone almost to the ear. Worse, he was knocked unconscious.

Still flying astern of Jackson, Crow first noticed something was wrong when he started gaining on his section leader. That shouldn't be. Now that they had completed their strafing run, he knew Jackson should be "balls to the walls," gaining speed and altitude. Then Crow saw gas streaming from Jackson's plane.

Once Crow drew even with the crippled jet, he could see the problem, if not the cause: a ripped starboard wingtip tank, now apparently drained of gas, and a partially shattered canopy, its inner surface misted with blood. Crow screamed into his radio: "Power, Jack! Power!"

Jackson remained unconscious for nearly 20 seconds as his plane faltered. Fortunately, before beginning the strafing run, he'd put back trim tab on his elevators so that when the nose dipped the Panther automatically began climbing. It was the jolt from one of these recovery climbs that brought him around, but he was still disoriented and blinded by blood. Mustering his concentration and muscle memory, Jackson managed to cut his speed enough to ease the rushing wind. Then he at last began responding to Crow's frantic radio calls.

Crow had been shouting at Jackson, detailing the damage to his airplane and urging him to line up on his wing—until he heard Jackson scream, "For God's sake, Dayl, I'm blind!"

"I'll fly wing on you," a chastened Crow responded, realizing he had to regain control of himself and the situation. First he coaxed Jackson to climb with him to about 2,000 feet. Next he got the wounded pilot to point his aircraft toward Philippine Sea, telling him: "OK, Ed, I'm taking you home. Ease to your right."

As Crow and Jackson reached the Yellow Sea, Lt. Cmdr. John L. Butts, VF-112's commanding officer, picked up their cross talk. Jack Butts' faint but familiar voice came through to both aviators: "Magnetic heading to ship is two-three-zero."

Crow coached Jackson onto the correct heading, but by that time the blinded flier was slipping in and out of consciousness. Each time he drifted off, his squadron mate's voice knifed in: "Add power, Ed. Pull up! Pull up!" Crow's distant badgering angered Jackson—but it kept him going.

Jackson dismissed the idea of punching out. During a catapult launch (his first in a jet) off Hawaii, his ejection seat had malfunctioned, nearly killing him. The locking mechanism securing the seat to the cockpit deck had failed as he took off. The seat slid up its vertical rails, yanking his hands from the controls and leaving him half in and half out of the plane. Jackson managed to lower the seat, grab the controls and stabilize the jet. Then, still shaking, he flew back to land on shore. He realized that now, even if his seat performed flawlessly, he lacked the endurance to survive a water landing.

As the pair finally neared Philippine Sea's flight pattern, another voice came on the circuit: "Keep talking to him, Dayl." It was division leader Lieutenant Douglas R. Hagood.

Crow coaxed Jackson, by now fading, through their descent. "Put your wheels and tail hook down. You're doing fine." For a moment Crow thought he had Jackson positioned for an approach, only to have him turn downwind instead of up. Below them the flight deck had been cleared as much as possible, with the aircraft stack moved forward and barriers in position.

"Flaps down now," Crow radioed once he had finally talked the wounded man—flying purely on reflexes now—back into the groove. Then, to his great relief, Crow heard yet another voice: "Ed, this is Les. Ed, I got you." It was Lt. j.g. L.K. "Les" Bruestle, one of the carrier's landing signal officers. Perched atop a tiny platform jutting over the flight deck's port quarter, Bruestle wielded two paddles framed in reflective fabric to visually guide pilots through approach and touchdown. Implicit in the visual signals was the pilot's absolute reliance on the LSO's judgment.

The paddles, of course, were of little use now.

"Ed, this is the LSO," Bruestle radioed. "Don't answer. Just listen. Take it easy." Bruestle's challenge was to substitute voice instructions for paddle commands. Jackson's ability to follow that guidance, despite his extensive injuries, required unflinching confidence in his flying skills, as well as the instincts to operate his cockpit controls by feel.

Crow circled and watched, praying the landing would succeed—for Jackson's sake and his own. He now had less than 600 pounds of fuel left, about enough to make just one landing approach before ditching.

"Too fast," Jackson heard Bruestle say, and he cut his speed. Bruestle's voice seemed to run like a current through his muscles.

"You're angling in too steep. Roll it out a bit." Jackson tried.

"You're in the slot now," Bruestle said calmly, but then with urgency added, "High and to the right!" Jackson adjusted.

There was silence—enough to make Jackson think he had overshot the deck—and then: "Cut it." Without a thought, the pilot dipped his jet's nose and pulled back on the stick to flare. He felt the arresting hook grab a wire. The Panther lurched and stopped. He was down.

Jackson had come in a little high and off centerline with only one flap down—the other had been damaged. His tail hook had trapped the number five wire. Emergency personnel, including the flight surgeon, raced to lift him out of the cockpit. "I can walk," Jackson insisted, only to collapse before he took a step. Strapped to a stretcher, he was hurried below to sick bay.

Jackson's landing was soon followed by the somewhat more routine recovery of Crow's aircraft. After he caught the third wire, his bone-dry Panther flamed out.

Following 36 stitches and an emergency transfusion, Jackson spent several days in the sick bay. Although the blood loss had been nearly fatal and his wounds were ugly—his left cheek was scarred for life—miraculously he suffered no permanent damage to either of his eyes. He was back on his feet within days, as was his plane; a shortage of serviceable jets earned the maimed Panther a reprieve. Within the week it was back on the flight line, and so was Jackson.

Jackson's remarkable blind landing, and the equally remarkable photos that chronicled it, went largely unnoticed in the U.S. media. At that point war news coverage was mostly devoted to the September 15 invasion of Inchon. The North Koreans were beating a hasty retreat, completely reversing—at least for a time—the fortunes of combatants in the "Forgotten War." Most correspondents filed their dispatches from the front lines, with few reporting from the sea lanes. The carrier action went largely unreported until the following year, when journalists such as James Michener went to sea.

Jackson's miracle landing did get some attention thanks to an October 1952 *Esquire* article, but it was largely overshadowed by a November 29, 1952, *Saturday Evening Post* article written by Navy Commander Harry A. Burns. In "The Case of the Blind Pilot," Burns told the dramatic story of VF-194 AD-4 Skyraider pilots Ensign Kenneth A. Schechter and Lt. j.g. Howard Thayer. During a March 22, 1952, strike on train yards near Wonsan, Schechter's cockpit had been shattered by flak. Thayer, Schechter's roommate aboard the carrier *Valley Forge*, took charge, coaxing his blinded, bleeding squadron mate away from enemy territory to a wheels-up crash landing on an abandoned airstrip in friendly territory.

The Thayer-Schechter tale became the dramatic centerpiece for the 1954 film *The Men of the Fighting Lady*, based on Burns' article and related accounts by Michener. Not surprisingly, the movie morphed Schechter's and Thayer's decidedly unglamorous prop-driven ADs into

F9Fs and relocated the blind landing to a carrier deck. But the producers did retain the real-life names, with actors Van Johnson and Dewey Martin portraying Thayer and Schechter.

The two Skyraider pilots and others involved in that incident deserved every scrap of the news coverage and accolades they received. Schechter, who later regained sight in one eye, finally received a Distinguished Flying Cross in a 1995 ceremony. Thayer, who died in 1961 while trying to assist another aviator, received a posthumous DFC in 2009.

Still, Ed Jackson can be forgiven for the assumption he made after watching *The Men of the Fighting Lady*—that the "blind pilot" story was about Crow and him. By the time Jackson died in September 2010, however, neither he nor Crow had received formal recognition for their own death-defying exploit.

*David Sears is the author of Such Men as These: The Story of the Navy Pilots Who Flew the Deadly Skies Over Korea, which is recommended for further reading.*