The Saturday Evening
POST
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The Nine Lives of a Parachute Tester
By VICTOR BOESEN

HERB SHRINER:
Shrewd Bumpkin of Television
By PETER ORDWAY

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.

Navy pilot Ensign Kenneth Schechter, at a hospital in Yokosuka, Japan, shortly before his return to the U. S. After treatment, he now has partial vision in his left eye, but his right eye is still sightless.

U. S. NAVY PHOTOS

Lt. (jg) Howard Thayer, on the wing of his Skyraider dive-bomber. Thayer guided Schechter to a safe landing by means of voice radio after Schechter was blinded by enemy antiaircraft fire in Korea.

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, and paying no attention to the heavy antiaircraft 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 Wongsang-ni in North Korea an enemy antiaircraft 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 (Continued on Page 66)

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THE CASE OF THE BLIND PILOT

(Continued from Page 41)

immediately astern of the cockpit were a crimson mess. As the blood began to dry in the cold morning air, it turned dark and blended with the Navy-blue color of the fuselage.

Schechter's face was horrible. As some blood dried, new rivulets flowed from his eyes and forehead. Raw beefsteak and catchup. "*My God, My God! How is he alive?*" Thayer asked himself, shuddering as he looked at Schechter.

Schechter by now was stirring inwardly. Maybe some air would help him see. He reached for the canopy release and yanked violently. Again he worked it before he realized that it was gone—shot away. He had air—more air than he needed. What's more, the loss of that canopy meant all the noise of his powerful engine was feeding into his mike every time he attempted to say anything, thus making it doubly hard for Thayer to understand him. He remembered his canteen and somehow got the top off. Holding it over his head, he poured water down his face, over his eyes. He shook his head. For a warm, beautiful, lovely, immediately ending second he could see part of the instrument panel swimming before his eyes. Then it was over and he was blind again.

"Get me down Howie. Get me down, Howie," he said.

"Roger." Thayer looked at the wings of Schechter's plane and saw a partial bombload underneath.

"Drop your ordnance," ordered Thayer.

The released bombs dropped toward the North Korean landscape below. Thayer dipped a wing and made sure there were no hung bombs.

"We're headed south, Ken," he said to Schechter. "Push over a little more. . . . That's the boy."

Thayer was talking automatically now, but he was thinking hard. Wonsan was first. If they could get to Wonsan, maybe Ken could bail out near one of our destroyers. That was the ticket at the moment. The thought that Ensign Schechter might black out from the loss of blood was uppermost in his mind. That would do it! You could steer a guy blindly—maybe. For a while anyway. But when his body loses enough blood and faints on you—curtains.

"We're headed for Wonsan, Ken. Not too long now."

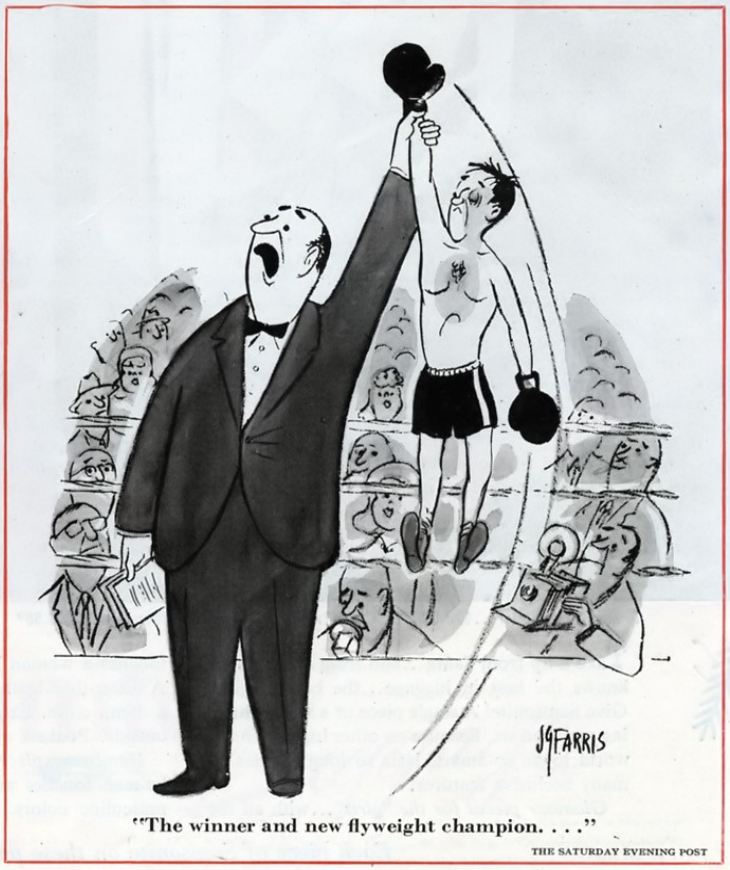
No answer.

Thayer glanced apprehensively at the other cockpit. Schechter was trying to pour water over his face again. Thayer wasn't sure he had been heard.

The water stung Schechter's eyes and the right side of his face. For the first time he was aware that something was drastically wrong with his right cheek.

Probing fingers told him what the trouble was. He had the equivalent of a third lip. A razor-sharp fragment of shell had caught him under the right nostril and had ripped laterally across his face to the middle of his right cheek. Now he had a sizable portion of flesh draped over his lower lip.

There was no pain yet—just the realization that it was there, compounding his speech difficulties. The second dose of water had accomplished the same result as the first—a fleeting glimpse, red-rimmed, of the panel area; then total eclipse. By now, the back of his head felt as if someone were pounding on it with a ball bat. Rhythmic bebop interspersed with flashes of pain that started in his groin and worked up to his throat. Nausea ate at him. Blood running down his throat made him want to vomit. Moments of near blackness.



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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 positive, though half drowned out by the engine noise and the distortion caused by wind rushing by the open mike.

Sitting there sightless, 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. Nope, he would ride his plane down somehow, somewhere, using his roommate's eyes. Or die trying. In his mind it was clear. He would hold on as long as he could and hope Howie Thayer would find a clear strip of beach south of the front lines. Or better still, a friendly field.

Thayer understood, without asking, Schechter's determination not to bail out. He knew he had to find a landing field and coach him down. As he thought, he kept scanning the shore line ahead for a sight of American warships at the battle line. That was the best way he had of knowing when he passed into friendly territory. He looked ahead anxiously for signs of a cruiser or battleship. A few minutes later he saw it—an American cruiser blazing away at communist troops ashore. What a beautiful sight!

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

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

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

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

"Can you make it, Ken?"

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

Schechter's voice took on some animation, as if just saying that his roommate and close friend would have to pack his gear, if he died, gave him some final drop of reserve energy. Ironically, it was true. Each pilot fills out a confidential card, which is retained on the carrier. Among other things, each names a person or persons to take care of his belongings, should he be killed in action. Both Schechter and Thayer had named the other to handle his affairs in the event ——

Thayer directed Schechter to turn right. As Schechter's plane turned, Thayer on the inside turned with it. Completing the change, they steadied on a course to head them for Geronimo. Thayer watched the other pilot. He saw Schechter's head fall forward, then straighten; only to flop over momentarily on his left shoulder.

This is it, he decided. *We go down—anywhere. A few more minutes—if we have even that long—and I've got a dead boy over there.* Thayer knew they'd never make Geronimo. He looked for the first likely spot. A paddy would do, if there was nothing better. Up ahead, he thought he saw an open area. Maybe. Maybe not.

"Kenny, 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.

The clear spot ahead became more visible. Thayer said to himself, *It's an abandoned airstrip. What a break.*

It was only then that he remembered there was such a place just barely south of the present battle line. An old strip used many months before for light recco planes, and now unused. "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 car and two or three men looking up at them as they approached the field from the east.

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

"Roger. Let's go," Schechter said, then repeated it. His voice was almost indistinct. His words were fast—too 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, enough to get them farther south to the larger field? It was too much of a risk to try to hold on longer. *We make this or nothing,* he said to himself. *I hope his flaps aren't shot up too bad. With a peewee runway like that one and no arresting wires to catch his hook, he's gonna need lots of flaps.*

"Left wing down slowly, nose over easy. Little more," Thayer said coolly.

The planes banked slightly 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 wing or doing a nose-over from hitting the runway off balance.

"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 God stores up for wounded men to draw on when a final desperate effort is needed. His senses, actuated by excitement, shunted the throbbing pain into the background. He made no effort to answer or acknowledge Thayer's orders. He followed each step with positive, silent confidence in Thayer's judgment. He firmly believed they would make it, unless ——

Thayer's voice: "We're heading straight. Hundred yards to runway.

(Continued on Page 69)

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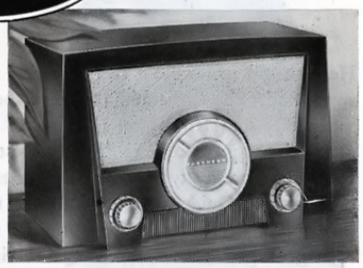

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(Continued from Page 67)

You're fifty 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."

Schechter tensed as he waited for the plane to hit the ground and slide along on its belly. The shock wasn't so bad as he had expected. The plane hit, lurched momentarily, then slid for yards and yards along the graveled runway. And finally came to rest, all in one piece.

"You're on the ground." As Thayer said it, he realized what an unnecessary transmission that had been. But in his joy at seeing the other plane safely down—no fire—his words tumbled out.

Thayer circled round and round, flying low. He saw Schechter clumsily climb out of his cockpit and stand leaning against the side of his plane, one hand to his face and the other bracing himself. Almost as soon as his feet hit the ground, the car that Thayer had spotted earlier raced down the runway. One of the two occupants leaped out and ran to the stricken pilot. Guiding and half supporting Schechter with an arm around his waist, the man got him to the car and inside it. Instantly it roared at high speed toward the buildings at the far end of the runway.

Thayer continued to circle until the car occupants were inside one of the buildings. Then he picked his course for home—the flight deck of the Valley Forge. Landing on board twenty minutes later, he was bone-weary from the terrific nervous tension. But he felt warm and good inside. Schechter, he hoped, was by now in the hands of competent medical personnel. Thank God for all the breaks.

As he climbed out of his plane, holding his charts and target data firmly in his hand, he was met by four or five of the senior pilots and operations officers. What the hell?

He was told quickly enough that just about everybody on the carrier knew what had gone on, and that all hands, from the task-force commander, Rear 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 sightless 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

"It's refreshing, Tilson, to have a member of the board who has the courage to stand up and disagree with me! Good-by and good luck."

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