



"F4U Corsair Carrier Qualification"
by Fred "Crash" Blechman

Finally, after 13 years of dreaming about becoming a Naval Aviator and earning my "Wings of Gold," this was my "final exam." Making six arrested carrier landings in an F4U-4 Corsair would earn me my gold wings and Ensign's commission. I had no idea I was about to crash.

It had been almost 21 arduous months since I had entered flight training. I had over 200 hours in SNJs, six arrested carrier landings in an SNJ, then almost 100 hours in Corsairs. Now, getting ready for Corsair carrier qualification, I had made 91 field carrier landing practice (FCLP) approaches and landings at Bronson Field near Pensacola. Just six carrier landings in a Corsair and I would "graduate."

So here I was, at about 9AM on August 10, 1950, flying F4U-4 Corsair #80893, together with five other students and our instructor, heading out to our carrier in the Gulf of Mexico off Pensacola. We rendezvoused with the light carrier U.S.S. Wright (CVL-49) as it churned at approximately 25 knots through the waters near Pensacola, Florida. The sea was calm with only occasional whitecaps from the gentle breeze. The azure sky was punctuated with random cotton balls. All was serene. Life was good. This was the day I'd been waiting for through so many episodes of "trial and terror."

Our flight received a "Charlie" landing clearance, formed a right echelon, and streaked upwind by the starboard side of the ship at about 800 feet as we peeled off to establish our landing intervals.

This was busy-time. Wheels, hook, flaps, power settings, trim, setting the beam position and interval while headed downwind, turning toward the carrier at the proper position, losing altitude, losing airspeed, spotting the landing signal officer (LSO), responding to LSO signals, adjusting bank and nose attitude... busy, busy time.

This was the real thing. There was no way we could accurately simulate landing on a moving carrier with those FCLP hops at Bronson Field-but they were the best means available to practice flying low and slow, follow the LSO's signals, and set the proper speed and attitude for a carrier approach in the "Hose Nose" Corsair.

My first four landings were normal, with no waveoffs, as we each in turn made our landings and takeoffs. After catching a wire, the barriers were dropped, and we made a deck-launched takeoff. But I was getting tired, and my light summer flight suit was drenched with sweat. I had no way of knowing that the next landing, #5, was going to be very different...

"Only two more landings to go," I thought as I prepared for my deck launch. With a ten-knot surface wind and the carrier's forward speed, the wind over the deck was approximately 35 knots. The takeoff should be easy. I checked various settings. Full flaps. Cowl flaps open. Hook up. Trim 6 degrees nose right, 1 degree nose up, 6 degrees right wing down. Tailwheel locked. Cockpit canopy open and locked. Shoulder straps and seat belt tight. Prop control full forward for maximum revolutions per minute (rpm). Mixture auto rich. Supercharger neutral. Wings locked. Controls move freely.

I watched the Launch Control Officer to my right give me the windup signal with his right arm as he pointed to my engine with his left arm. I advanced the throttle to 42 inches of manifold pressure and applied full toe brakes by pressing down the tops of the rudder pedals. At above 44 inches the wheels would start slipping on the deck, so full power could not yet be used. I held the joystick all the way back to keep the tail from lifting up and possibly digging the tips of the 13-foot four-bladed propeller into the wooden flight deck.

The 2100 horsepower Pratt and Whitney R-2800-18W(C) Double-Wasp 18-cylinder radial engine roared and the whole airplane shook with anticipation as I verified proper engine readings and signaled I was ready with a head nod. (I dared not let go of the stick for a right hand salute, or the tail could come up!) The Launch Control Officer threw his arm forward with two fingers extended, the signal for me to release the brakes and take off.

Surging forward, the Corsair picked up speed and rumbled down the deck. I added throttle to full power-approximately 54 inches of manifold pressure-and held a lot of right rudder to counter the torque of the huge engine and propeller sticking out 15 feet ahead of me. Releasing back stick pressure, the tail lifted and I could finally see where I was headed. I aimed for the right side of the deck, lifting off easily before the ship slipped behind, with nothing but rippling water beneath me. A slight right turn cleared my slipstream from the plane landing behind me, as I climbed ahead of the ship at 125 knots to the 800-foot pattern altitude. Since I was just going around to make another landing, I left the flaps and wheels down. At pattern altitude I reduced the throttle setting to 34 inches of manifold pressure, set the propeller to 2300 rpm, and reset the trim tabs for neutral stick pressure.

About a mile ahead of the ship I made a 180-degree left turn, descending to 200 feet for the downwind leg. I dropped my tailhook, unlocked my tailwheel, and set myself up approximately 3000 feet abeam of the ship, fast approaching on my port side as it steamed upwind.

Landing #5

The plane was flying smoothly with the canopy open and locked. The hot Gulf air and the roar of the engine blustered in from both sides of the windshield. Everything in the cockpit seemed A-okay, warm and comfortable as an old shoe as I watched the ship slip past my nose and toward my left wing.

As the straight deck of the light carrier Wright steamed upwind and its wake appeared ahead of my left wingtip, I banked sharply toward the ship's stern and began slowing the airplane down to an approach speed of 90 knots. Check flaps down, wheels down, hook down, tail wheel unlocked. I shoved the prop control forward for full rpm and reset the trim tabs to takeoff settings in case of a waveoff. I set my rate of descent to about 150 feet per minute, maintaining just enough throttle to hold the nose up approximately 15 degrees, hanging on the prop.

I checked my altitude by seeing where the clear, flat horizon crossed the ship's mast above the bridge, since that indicated exactly how high I was above the deck. At approximately the 90 degree

position on the base leg I picked up the LSO with his colored paddles on the port fantail. Now the challenge was to keep the ship from getting ahead of me, since it was churning away from me at roughly 60 feet per second (including the surface wind that was trying to drag me even further behind). I watched the horizon crossing the bridge for altitude, and carefully controlled the power and nose attitude for holding around 90 knots-just a few knots above stalling!

I used a simple technique to properly intercept the ship. I put the left side of the Corsair's nose on the center of the deck at the aft end-and held it there! If I tried to judge my turn any other way I would invariably get sucked back behind the ship with a straightaway to catch up-but then I'd lose sight of the LSO under the Corsair's long nose.

There was no luxury of any significant straightaway in landing on those old straight-deck carriers when you were flying a long-nose Corsair in a nose-up attitude. You just couldn't see ahead of you-only off to the side. We essentially pyloned counter-clockwise around the LSO in order to keep him in sight!

As I got close in, I tried to keep the nose aimed toward the ship's centerline. This was not only affected by the ship's forward motion, but also by the wind over the deck. This wind was seldom straight down the deck, but approximately 15-degrees to port so the turbulence from the ship's stacks and bridge did not appear in the flight path of the landing planes. This made for a very tricky approach and last few seconds...

At this slow speed, just a few knots above stalling, it took a lot of right rudder, even though in a left turn. And you didn't dare add power quickly since the powerful engine turning that large prop could make the aircraft roll uncontrollably to the left-the dreaded "torque roll."

It took a lot of back stick, considerable power, and right rudder to hang in there. As I approached the ramp in a left turn, the LSO's paddles and my own perception was that I was drifting to the right of the deck centerline. Too much right rudder. I cross-controlled a bit and slipped to the left just as I approached the ramp, and got a "cut," the mandatory command to cut my power and land.

"Ah, landing number 5," I thought as I relaxed, dropped the nose, and pulled back to drop the tail so my hook would catch an early wire. But I relaxed too soon! Perhaps I was more tired than I realized, but my wings were not level, and I didn't pull back soon enough. The left main gear hit first, blowing the tire, and the plane bounced back in the air. At this point the tailhook caught the #3 wire and slammed the Corsair back on to the deck. On this second impact the left wheel strut broke and the right tire blew out!

I was thrown with more force than usual against my shoulder harness as the plane tilted to the left and settled on the deck. The carrier crash horn blew. Deck hands, some carrying fire extinguishers, came scampering up from the catwalks and surrounded the airplane. Controlled pandemonium reigned as I was quickly unbuckled and helped out of the cockpit, since fire after a crash was always a danger.

A Corsair zoomed overhead taking a "fouled deck" waveoff. It was Midshipman John A."Jack" Eckstein, my roommate and good friend through most of flight training. He told me later he was so shaken by my accident right in front of him as he was making his approach for his fifth landing that it took him several more passes to get in his last two landings. (He got his wings, stayed in the Navy, and retired as a Captain.)

I was not injured at all-except for my pride. But I was very concerned about being washed out of flight training, shattering a 13 year dream-and with only one landing to go! I had special reason to be concerned since I had my only previous accident just three weeks before when I torque-rolled a Corsair on a waveoff during my first field carrier landing practice flight at Bronson Field, and crumpled the left wing. No personal injury there, either, and a Student Pilot Disposition Board allowed me to continue training.

Disposition Board-Again!

Now I had to appear a second time before the Student Pilot Disposition Board to determine if I would get washed-out, or would get the chance to make that one remaining landing (the crash counted as #5) to get my wings. Was it my unblemished record prior to three weeks earlier, was it my sincerity and obvious strong desire to become a Naval Aviator, or was it the fact that North Korea had invaded South Korea a month or so before, and the Navy was calling up the Reserves and anticipated the need for more pilots? Whatever the reason, I was awarded some additional field carrier landing practice and another try for that last carrier landing!

Five days after the crash I climbed aboard the same Corsair, #80893, now with new tires and a new port landing gear strut, and made five field carrier practice landings at Bronson Field, and was considered qualified to make that last arrested landing needed to get my wings. Three days later, on August 18, I walked aboard the U.S.S. Wright in port at 6AM. The carrier steamed out into the Gulf of Mexico for that day's carrier qualifications.

Landing #6

The first flight of Corsairs appeared at 9AM and began their qualification landings. The first to complete his six landings was NavCad Vince "Rick" Ricciardi, whom I'd known since pre-flight. I congratulated him as he climbed down from his Corsair, #97168, and I clambered aboard. I strapped myself in with the help of a plane captain, checked all the power and control settings, and deck launched. One landing to go.

This was it! If I had too much trouble getting aboard, or crashed again, it was certain I would be washed out. The takeoff and downwind leg were normal, but as I made the approach I got more tense than usual as I considered the consequences of failing. This probably made me concentrate more than in previous landings, since I got a "Roger" flag signal from the LSO all the way into the cut, and caught the #3 wire. I did it! I had qualified to be a Naval Aviator!

The ceremony for commissioning as Ensign, and receiving the "Wings of Gold," was held at Pensacola on August 23, 1950. My mother flew in from New York to pin on my wings and bars. I've never done anything more difficult-or of which I'm more proud-than earning those gold wings! And after over thirty arrested carrier landings, I learned to drive a car...

SIDEBAR

Flashback-First Try

I was six years old in 1933 when I went up for my first \$5 plane ride over New York City. It left me with an indelible impression of all those little houses, little cars, little roads, plowed fields, and tiny, tiny people-and how the whole world twisted and turned as the pilot maneuvered the airplane. I loved it! However, it wasn't until 1937, at age ten, at a Navy airshow with fat, gray-and-yellow Navy biplanes, that I decided I was going to be a Navy pilot!

After eight years of building model airplanes and devouring flying magazines, my chance came in July of 1945 when I joined the Navy V-5 program as an Apprentice Seaman for four semesters of college training in uniform before entering flight training. Finally, in August of 1946 I became an "AvCad," the term used at that time for Aviation Cadets. After eight flights in an N2S Stearman "Yellow Peril" in Dallas, Texas, I successfully soloed on September 16. Then it was on to pre-flight training at Ottumwa, Iowa.

However, I maintained contact with John Higson, who had stayed in the program, and heard about the "Ab Initio" (From the Beginning) program my former classmates were beginning at Cabaniss Field in Corpus Christi. They were starting out in SNJs as the primary trainer instead of the Stearman-and I would have been in the first class to do this! This drove me nuts. I haunted the Navy recruiting office trying to get back into Navy flight training. It took two years, but in November of 1948 I got back into flight training and headed to Pensacola for pre-flight. This time we were called "NavCads," a new designation that officially began on June 22, 1948 with a new Navy flight training program.

I completed pre-flight at Pensacola, then basic flight training in SNJs at Pensacola (with six arrested carrier landings on the U.S.S. Cabot (CVL-28) on 23 March, 1950), advanced flight training in F4U-4 Corsairs at Cabannis Field in Corpus Christi, and then back to Pensacola for Corsair carrier qualification. Oh, by the way, being a city-boy, I had never learned to drive a car, but I was flying Corsairs!

ACCIDENT REPORT #1

Date: 18 July 1950, 14:35Pilot: NavCad Frederick Blechman USNR

Organization: CQTU 4, NAAS, Corry Field, CNABT, CNAT, BUAER

Aircraft: F4U-4 #62132

Purpose: FCLP

Hrs.last 3 months: 75.1; Total hours: 282.6

Location: Bronson Field

Weather: Contact

Injuries: None

SPECIFIC ERRORS:

Pilot failed to level his wings as he applied power for waveoff. Pilot permitted plane to stall while attempting waveoff.

ANALYSIS:

Pilot was on FCLP syllabus. He was making his second approach of the period and overshot the groove. The LSO waved him off and the pilot added power but continued to turn in towards platform. Plane continued to roll to left and struck runway. Initial impact was on left wing followed by left wheel and then right wheel about 60-feet past LSO platform. Upon impact pilot closed throttle and plane remained on landing gear. It rolled to stop heading approximately 45-degrees from duty runway about 70 yards from LSO platform.

Pilot attempted to take waveoff from turn after overshooting groove. He made no attempt to level wings until after full power had been applied. Sudden increase in engine torque plus fact that he was already in turn stalled out left wing and made it impossible to return plane to level flight after wing started down because of insufficient altitude.

Pilot after his initial mistake used good judgment after wing struck runway by taking off all power and remaining on ground. This action minimized damage to aircraft.

This accident could have been avoided if pilot had leveled his wings as he applied full power for waveoff.

SPECIAL EQUIPMENT:

Shoulder harness effective.

LOCAL RECOMMENDATIONS:

(1) That Blechman be ordered to appear before Student Pilot Disposition Board. (2) That circumstances leading to this accident be explained to Students and Instructors attached to this unit.

COMMANDING OFFICER:

Student remanded to Student Pilot Disposition Board which awarded him extra time and to continue training. It is believed that this accident was due to lack of experience rather than lack of aeronautical skill. Analysis of accident posted on squadron safety bulletin board.

REMARKS:

Damage: Left wing and aileron.

ACCIDENT REPORT #2

Date: 10 August 1950, 13:42 Pilot: NavCad Frederick Blechman USNR

Organization: CQTU-4, NAAS Corry Field, CNABT, CNAT, BUAER

Aircraft: F4U-4 #80893

Purpose: Carrier Qualification

Hrs. last 3 months: 80.3; Total hours: 303.2

Location: USS Wright (CVL-49)

Weather: Contact

Injuries: None

SPECIFIC ERRORS:

Pilot did not land plane after cut as instructed, but instead nosed over excessively and landed wheels first.

ANALYSIS:

Pilot was making his fifth carrier landing aboard the USS Wright. The approach was good and the "cut" given. After cut, pilot dived for the deck, landing on his port main gear. The port tire blew on impact. The aircraft bounced but engaged the #3 wire, which pulled plane back to the deck. On second impact, the port strut broke and the starboard tire blew. Pilot nosed over excessively after the cut.

SPECIAL EQUIPMENT:

Shoulder harness averted possible injury.

LOCAL RECOMMENDATIONS:

That NavCad be ordered to appear before a Student Pilot Disposition Board. All instructors are cautioned to keep rebriefing the students on proper landing technique.

COMMANDING OFFICER:

Student was remanded to Student Pilot Disposition Board, which awarded him one warm-up and a recheck. Analysis of accident and improper procedures used were presented to all students and posted on Squadron Safety Bulletin Board.

REMARKS:

Damage: Landing gear left and right, propeller.

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