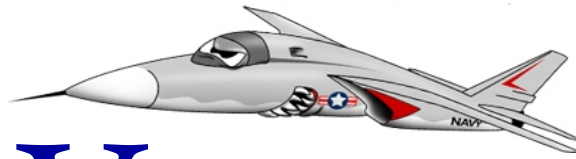




# The VIGILANTE



## Points of Interest!

- Over 100 Shipmates and friends have joined the RVAHNAVY Association...how about you?
- The Roster is growing like CRAZY!
- Shipmates are using the Forum to locate each other after more than 30 years.
- RVAHNAVY Reunion 2009 is coming to the Cradle of Naval Aviation

## Inside this Edition

- Feature...Ejection Aboard the USS Constellation 1973
- RVAHNAVY Reunion
- Important Statistics
- Looking for Shipmates?
- The Forum
- Trivia
- RVAHNAVY Newsletter gets a new look and a new name
- RVAHNAVY Benevolence fund begins
- Coming next month
- What is this Canopy doing in a GA swamp?
- Pictures from Key West Reunion

## TRIVIA?

Which RVAH squadron was the only one that did NOT do a tour in Viet Nam? Hint: they did not sail a WestPac cruise. Post your answer on the RVAH-NAVY.com Forum.

## "Ah...605, I BELIEVE YOU LEFT A TANK BEHIND"



USS Constellation Flight Deck

By Dockrammer

They sat patiently for their turn to launch. Routine. Almost mundane and certainly repetitive. Lcdr "Howie" Fowler reacted with the cockpit controls as the yellow shirt precisely motioned with his hands. The lumbering Vigi surged slowly forward toward the now lowering JBD. The yellow shirt handed off Lcdr Fowler to the launch crew as the RA-5C straddled the #2 catapult of the USS Constellation. As the deck crew connected the launch bridal and the hold back Ltjg Art DiPadova chimed in from the backseat with the usual pre-launch checks. The launch crew fully extended the nose gear and the aircraft squatted slightly as the catapult took tension. The Cat Officer called for the pilot to increase to 100% power on both engines. There were two simultaneous booms as the two afterburners ignited. Howie took a last sweep of the instruments, confirmed that Art was ready to go and then saluted the Cat Officer who, in turn, swept his right arm forward and touched the deck. From inside

the cockpit the catapult shot felt routine and normal until the aircraft crested the bow of the ship wherein the ramps caution light illuminated and the aircraft nose dropped causing the aircraft to settle. Howie had to apply an un-



Lcdr Fowler & Ltjg DiPadova (1973)

usual amount of back stick to bring the nose back to a climbing attitude. Art called from the backseat for "Flaps!" and Howie responded with "Flaps 30" as the aircraft began a climbing right clearing turn. The pilot reset all of the warning lights and everything appeared normal. 10 to 15 seconds after the Vigilante had become airborne, the

Constellation departure control transmitted:

**"Speartip 605 you appear to have lost a fuel tank . . . "Almost immediately, Art said from the backseat: "I have a**

**Fire Warning Light." Howie looked down and responded: "Roger, fire light #1 and #2 engines." As**

Art repeated his indications Howie began to pull the throttles out of after burner and tried to commence a climb. However, before he could do anything, the aircraft began to buffet slightly and both aviators felt what they thought were explosions coming from the aft part of the aircraft. Simultaneously, the Caution and Warning enunciator panels lit up like a Christmas tree and the stick froze pitching the aircraft about 20 degrees nose down and causing a very violent starboard roll that they estimated to be approximately 300 to 400 degrees a second. It was abundantly clear to the crew that this aircraft had become an "un-reusable container" and that they needed to exit - NOW!!! **Howie told Art, "Eject! Eject!"**...To read the first hand account of this amazing story as told by the Pilot and the RAN see pages 3-7.



### RVAHNAVY Reunion 2009 is coming back to the "Cradle of Naval Aviation!" by Alvis

Get ready Pensacola...we're coming back. **Save the date: June 18-21, 2009.** We were in Pensacola for a fantastic reunion in 2002. We will be in the planning stages for the next several months. We are expecting our best turn out ever. If you want to assist please contact Alvis Didway: [alvdid45@yahoo.com](mailto:alvdid45@yahoo.com) You won't want to miss this gathering.

### Looking for Shipmates? by Joe Phillips

We have over 1000 email addresses for our VAH/ RVAH shipmates. If you would like to make contact with someone you served with, please put a post on the Forum under "Lost Shipmates" and we'll forward that post to your shipmate if we have their current email. We'll let them know that you are asking about them and invite them to join the forum so they can make contact with you. We will not provide your contact information unless you ask us to. Also, if you prefer, you can send an email to [joe@therafl.com](mailto:joe@therafl.com) inquiring about your shipmate in private.

### The RVAHNAVY Newsletter has a new name!



"The Vigilante" makes it's debut this month. The letter style was borrowed from the style used in early A-3J imagery and icons. Also, the newsletter is now multi-page! We hope you like it. We are always looking for Newsletter stories so please use the Forum to submit your ideas and stories.

### A VERY special Thank You! by Noel Briley

Mr Wickey "AKA" Michael Thompson contributed \$120 to the Association to establish the RVAH-NAVY benevolence and memorial fund. If you would like to contribute to this fund please contact Dan or Noel at [rvahnavy@rvahnavy.com](mailto:rvahnavy@rvahnavy.com)

### From the RVAHNAVY Webmaster by Bob Marioni

Our website is still in its infancy but has been very active. In the month of March there were more than **340,000** hits to the site. There are a lot of great things planned for the near future. I will be posting more photos of Reunion 2007 and I will be setting up photo pages for each squadron. When RVAHNAVY gear is available you will be able to place your order from the site as well. Our forum is going strong with more than 203 members to date. We average **1900** hits a day so it is very active. Keep up with your posts and others will follow. It's a great way to stay in touch with former shipmates and friends and meet new people who share a common bond.

### RVAHNAVY Merchandise & Gear by Dockrammer

We are negotiating with numerous vendors to bring you a wide variety of very cool RVAH items. Coffee Mugs, vintage patches, mouse pads and so much more. We want very high quality and value so we are researching this very carefully and slowly. We will be making a MAJOR announcement about this very soon.



## RA-5C Ejection Story (The RAN's View)

By Art DiPadova

“605, BELIEVE YOU LEFT A TANK BEHIND”

In 1973, my squadron, Reconnaissance Attack Squadron Twelve (RVAH-12), was embarked on board U.S.S. Constellation. The Connie had left San Diego shortly after New Year's in 1973 for what was to be an almost ten month WESTPAC cruise. Because the ceasefire was declared later in January of 1973, the air wing did not conduct any flights over North Vietnam but for a short period of time, we flew over Laos and then we flew extensively over South Vietnam. Also, because of the ceasefire, the air wing had little in the way of tasking, however, being a reconnaissance squadron, we were generally tasked with photographing sections of the Ho Chi Minh Trail, roadways, and coastal areas searching for truck parks and other evidence of supplies being brought down from North Vietnam into the south. Lieutenant Commander Howie Fowler and I were tasked to fly one of these reconnaissance missions on April 21st but the pictures of us taking off were probably more exciting than anything we had photographed on the ground during that cruise. Howie and I flew as a crew during our tour in RVAH-12 and, in fact, we had both started training in the RA-5C Vigilante at the same time and had flown most of our training missions as a crew in the RA-5C Replacement Air Group. Coincidentally, after completing training, we were assigned to the same squadron and although initially we were not paired up, asked our CO to put us together as an operational crew which, to my delight, he agreed to do. We were scheduled for a late afternoon launch and as was typically the case, we were about the last airplane on the launch. The Vigi, being the largest aircraft on the ship at that time, was usually parked aft of the island and did not wind up getting a spot on the catapults until the other aircraft had gone. To slow things down a bit further, we were initially spotted on cat three but because of a problem with the shuttle, we were moved up to cat two. After getting hooked up and making sure everything was in place in the cockpit, Howie ran up the engines. The instruments looked good and we went into afterburner. A recheck of the instruments was still good and Howie, as usual, let me know he was saluting the catapult officer and I put my head

against the head rest and waited for the shot.

As our aircraft, NG 605, cleared the deck, it seemed to settle a bit but I could feel it establish a positive rate of climb. As was our procedure, as soon as the aircraft cleared the deck, I called for “flaps” to remind Howie to raise the flaps from the full flap position to the one-half flap position. Howie acknowledged that and a few seconds later, he asked me, “Did you feel that settle off the cat?” I said, “Yeah, what was that?” Howie said he wasn't sure; he had gotten a RAMPS light but the fuse reset and the light went out. I thought perhaps that might have something to do with it but there did not seem to be a problem at that point so we just continued on. This was a Case One departure, meaning a daylight launch, and generally we were to maintain an altitude of 300-500 feet until we were several miles from the ship, at which point, we would continue on our mission. Because we were the last airplane on the launch, we knew that there would be F-4's breaking overhead at 800 feet for the landing pattern and to maximize the separation, we generally stayed around 300 feet until we were clear of the ship's operating area and on this flight, leveled off at 300 feet. What we did not realize is what had happened back on the deck. The Vigi was originally designed as a heavy (nuclear) bomber and had a linear bomb bay in between the two engines. The Navy decided against purchasing the A5 for that purpose and North American Rockwell reconfigured the aircraft to the RA-5C including a reconnaissance pod and was able to convince the Navy to purchase it as a dedicated reconnaissance vehicle. Since the space in between the two engines was not being used, the Navy did what it would usually do with any extra space on an aircraft and that is fill it with fuel. The bomb bay could carry up to three fuel cans that would be hooked together in between the engines. Each can carried 2,000 pounds of fuel, mounted internally in between the engines,

and was covered with an aerodynamic tail cone.

On the catapult launch, something happened to NG 605 that had not ever happened to a Vigilante before that period. The aft fuel can separated from the train of cans on the catapult shot and landed on the deck. As it separated, it broke connections between the two cans remaining in the aircraft, spilling fuel into the aft bomb bay area. The Vigi takes off in maximum afterburner which lit off the residual fuel and the pictures from the PLAT show a huge fireball behind the airplane as the cat stroke begins and a raging fire in the bomb bay as it left the end of the flight deck. In fact, it looked like the airplane had three engines. The flight deck crew had the unenviable



Art DiPadova (today)

task of trying to dispose of a burning can containing 2000 pounds of jet fuel laying on the deck and, brave souls that they were, managed to maneuver it over the side. Meanwhile, aboard 605, things were apparently normal and we were just getting to the task of going through the after take-off checklist. I was organizing things for proceeding on our mission. I hadn't heard anything on the radio but then CATCC came up and announced “605, believe you left a tank behind . . .” As I was hearing this, I started to reach for my emergency pocket checklist, thinking at the same time that there is nothing in there about losing a fuel can. However, before CATCC was even done talking, I saw the fire warning light come on. I called to Howie, “I have a fire warning light. I have a fire warning light.” I heard Howie start to acknowledge and in the background, I could hear the sound of the other annunciator lights and warnings going off. Again, within the merest fraction of a second, the airplane began a violent right wing down roll. Aviators often wonder, if there came a time when they needed to eject, would they hesitate in making the decision, possibly waiting too long? It was amazing how quickly I came to a decision. What flashed through my mind was that we were at 300 feet, accelerating through 250 knots, had a fire warning light, and a violent uncommanded roll.

## RA-5C Ejection Story (The RAN's View)

There was not a moment's hesitation making the decision that I needed to get out—now! I reached for the left hand turn and pull knob which was near my knee. The violence of the roll caused me to slip at first but then I grabbed it and pulled it. As I pulled it, I heard Howie say, "Eject!" The next thing I remembered is very similar to the experience that Howie recounted and that was how time seemed to slow down for an instant. I actually saw the smoke from the cartridge that began the ejection sequence rising very slowly in front of my face. After that, all Hell broke loose. The wind blast on exiting the aircraft plus the acceleration from the seat was incredible. My oxygen mask was torn off and my helmet went sideways, beating me in the face. I very definitely felt seat-man separation and myself rolling forward from the seat but before there was any shock of an opening chute or anything like that, I hit the water head first.

**The roar of the wind suddenly stopped and it became very quiet as I realized I was underwater.**

**My first thought was "Wow! You just ejected!" My second thought was that I better do something to get up to the surface.**

At that time, our flight gear included the LPA-1 life preserver. It had two toggles by the waist which would inflate a couple of bladders around your waist and one around the neck. With the LPA-1, you needed to pull the right toggle first because that would inflate the collar around the neck. Then the left toggle would give you a bit more buoyancy. As I went to pull the right toggle, I realized that I could not move my right arm. There was no pain or discomfort. It simply did not work. After a second, I tried again and, again, I was unable to move my right arm. Plan two came next which was to pull the left toggle and as I reached down to locate it, of course, I could not find it. This is the only time I became a little bit anxious during the se-

quence. Before that, there was no time to even think about being frightened. When I could not find the left toggle, I thought I would try to swim and I took a few strokes with my left arm but then stopped. I realized that with fifty pounds of flight gear and only one arm, I was not going to get very far. I told myself that after just ejecting, there was no way I was going to drown. I reached down with my left hand and immediately located the toggle and tugged it. The vest inflated and rising through the water at what I estimated to be at least five feet was the best feeling in the world.

As soon as I hit the surface, the first thing I did was take a huge breath, the bulk of which was sea water, but it did feel good to have at least my face above the surface. In fact, with only a partially inflated life vest and 3-4 foot seas, there was not much else other than my face above the surface. I had this tremendous feeling of exhaustion and for a few seconds, sat there and found that if I put my left arm over the bladder, I could keep my face out of the water most of the time. How-

ever, I realized that I needed to get rid of the chute before it sank, taking me with it. I was able to release the left riser on my parachute but again, I experienced the inability to move my right arm and could not release the right side. Trying to reach with just my left hand was difficult and simply caused me to roll over in the water. I thought what I would try next is to get rid of my seat pan. The seat pan comes with you when you separate from the seat and contains such items as your life raft and other survival equipment. I had no illusion about being able to get into my life raft and knowing that all of this occurred right in front of the ship, I was pretty confident we would be picked up shortly so I decided I would get rid of my seat pan and hopefully be able to float a little better without the extra weight. I did somehow manage to release the fittings and about that time, I heard the Angel heading over toward me.

Knowing that the helo was going to pick me up in a few minutes, I just waited for it to come. The first thing that happens when the helo approaches is that you experience the spray kicked up by the rotors. In fact, it was like having a fire hose pointed at my face—more water to swallow. Then, as the helo positioned itself over me, I was in the vacuum created by the rotors which seemed to suck the little air I had in my lungs right out. However, I saw the swimmer drop in the water and he came over to me with the first words that I am sure all rescue swimmers are instructed



USS Constellation (CV 64)

to say: "You're going to be all right". At that point, I was certain that was the case and it was just a matter of getting to work. The young swimmer (he was younger than me and I was all of 24) proceeded to try to separate me from the chute. I was entangled in the shroud lines and he was under the water and around me trying to pull them away from me. Since I had only my face out of the water, every time he pulled on the shroud lines, it pulled me underwater and I was having a really difficult time breathing. Eventually, he got close enough to me where I could grab him and I pulled him over and said, "You're drowning me!" At that point, he looked around (I did not think to suggest that he pull the toggle on the life vest) and then did an amazing thing. He took off his UDT (life) vest and put it around my neck and continued to clear me of the chute.

During this time, I noted that my right leg

## RA-5C Ejection Story (The RAN's View)

hurt quite a lot. What had happened was that the hamstring in my right leg was completely torn. What we did not find out until several months later was that I had also torn all the ligaments in my right knee. Also, the heavy flight boot that I wore on my right foot had the sole almost completely torn off and was just attached around the toe. I think my leg might have gotten caught on something with the roll and the ejection and that I almost had my leg torn off (amazingly, I was flying 30 days later).

When the swimmer finally got the chute removed, he signaled for the helicopter. Again, I experienced the same fire hose in the face feeling, followed by the air being sucked out of my lungs. The swimmer came over with the line and was trying to figure out how to hook it up to me when I grabbed the snap link on my harness. The snap links were fairly new but they made it really easy to hook up to the line and the swimmer hooked himself up as well. The hoist raised slightly, to where my legs were still hanging in the water a bit. The link was attached to the torso harness and as the helo continued to pull me up, all my weight settled down on the straps that went under my legs, including the strap that went across the torn hamstring. The pain was so sharp and intense that I just threw up into the water. Also, looking down I noticed that the water was colored red and I realized that I had probably been bleeding. I was hoisted up into the helicopter and let the crew pull me inside. I was laid on the floor and at that time, I told them that there was something wrong with my leg. We then proceeded over to Howie's position and I watched the swimmer drop in the water again. It was only three or four minutes before I saw the hoist come up and there in the doorway was Howie. This is the first time I remember moving my right arm. As they pulled Howie into the helo, I reached up and grabbed him by the arm. It wasn't so much to help him in as for the reassurance that he was really there and he was safe.

The whirlwind continued. As soon as the helo touched down on the flight deck, the flight surgeon jumped in and began to examine my leg. He had been told there was a problem and he was just checking to make sure there was a pulse in my foot and that at least everything was connected. He next tried to figure out how to get me out of my flight gear without destroying any-

thing and finally decided to just cut it off. Afterwards, he told me he realized that it was kind of silly to worry about cutting up my flight equipment after having just lost a multi-million dollar airplane. After he was done with his examination, I was put onto a litter and carried below deck to the medical ward.

While there, the story began to come out from our end. Of course, there were about 20 aircraft overhead in the landing pattern who saw most of what happened. Most of the people on the ship didn't see an ejection at all and those who did see an ejection saw only one. Although several of the flight crews in the landing pattern overhead saw Howie eject and his chute deploy before he hit the water, they saw me go out while the aircraft was inverted and only my partially deployed chute on the surface of the water. After being examined and everything looking not too bad, except perhaps for some soft tissue injury in the hamstring, my body was completely x-rayed. The x-rays were all negative. When the ship's surgeon came down and was told the details of the accident (that is, me ejecting into the water inverted at 300 feet and hitting it without a chute) and that there were no broken bones, he ordered another complete x-ray which, as the first, turned out negative. Because of the trauma in my leg from the torn hamstring, the knee injury was not visible and didn't surface until several months later. However, as noted above, after a few weeks of bed rest, I was back in flight status and flying again. In fact, I ended the cruise with the second most flight time of any of the crew members in the squadron.

A number of years later, a friend of mine who was the commanding officer of a reserve P3 squadron at Willow Grove, Pennsylvania asked me to speak before the group. He wanted me not only to tell my story but also to tie it in to what it means to be part of the Navy and esprit de corps. I thought about it and as I did, I was surprised at the things that really popped into my mind looking back on the event. It was not so much the terror of the fire warning light, the rapid roll, or the wind blast, but certain other events stuck in my mind. I remembered being carried down from the flight deck on the litter. I looked around at the people grabbing the litter and hurrying me down to the medical ward and you could not have fit another set of hands on there. I remembered being visited in the

medical ward by everyone from the 7th Fleet (who were aboard the Constellation at the time) to the guys in my division. I remembered the Chaplain's prayer that evening when he came over the 1MC as he did every evening. The prayer that night was special to me because he thanked God for the safe return of the two aircrew who had gone into the water earlier that day. What I thought about during that prayer, and what I told the group that I addressed, is that for a period of time, there was a Constellation crewman in serious danger of being lost in the ocean. At that point, there were 5,000 people on board the ship whose entire focus was rescuing that one crewman. That one crewman was of course me and while we often talk about esprit de corps and being part of a ship's crew, I had the honor of experiencing it first hand. Believe me, it is not just a lot of talk.

We did not come back from the cruise with a great deal of medals but Howie and I came back with one great sea story which I know I have told hundreds of times over the years. One question people ask me is whether, after that incident, I was afraid of getting back into the cockpit. Actually, my feeling was quite the opposite. I had a great deal of confidence in the airplane and its egress system and even more so in my shipmates, who I knew would be there to take care of me if anything ever went wrong.

### AFTERWARD

I think Howie mentioned in his version of the story that years later, his son, who attended the Naval Academy, was speaking with one of his instructors and mentioned the fact that his father was a retired Naval Aviator. They got to talking and the accident came up. It turned out that the instructor was the helicopter pilot that picked us up.

Just a few months ago, the P3 skipper who had asked me to speak to his group called me. He lives in Annapolis and his daughter was dating a midshipman whose father was a physician in California. The families were talking together and it turns out that the physician had been a flight surgeon in the Navy. They were swapping stories and my friend told him of my accident. The doctor thought it was quite an unusual story, especially since he recalled it and was, in fact, the flight surgeon who hopped into the helicopter to first attend me. We hooked up on the phone and had a nice chat. The Navy world really is a small one sometimes.

## RA-5C Ejection Story (The Pilot's View)

By **Howie Fowler**

It was slated to be a late afternoon reconnaissance mission over Vietnam that would launch at 1653 local from the USS Constellation on Saturday, April 21, 1973. My Reconnaissance Attack Navigator (RAN), LTJG Art DiPadova and I went through a normal mission brief and pre-flight inspection. The engines were started, flight system checked, and then the aircraft was taxied to the number 2 catapult. The nose gear was extended and when the bridal and hold-back were secured, the Cat Officer called for 100% power on both engines. The aircraft squatted slightly as the catapult took tension on the aircraft and then the Cat Officer signaled for afterburner. There were two simultaneous booms as the two afterburners ignited. I took a last sweep of the instruments, confirmed that Art was ready to go and then saluted the Cat Officer who, in turn, swept his right arm forward and touched the deck. The shot felt normal until we left the bow of the ship wherein the ramps caution light illuminated and the aircraft nose dropped causing the aircraft to settle. I had to apply an unusual amount of back stick to bring the nose back to a climbing attitude. Art called for "Flaps" and I responded with "Flaps 30" as we began our climbing right clearing turn. Immediately retracting the flaps from 50 to 30 was very important since single engine flight was not sustainable when flaps were greater than 30. Not knowing what had happened, I assumed that the engine inlet ramps had inadvertently monitored down which could restrict airflow to the engines and cause a reduction in thrust – which – in turn could cause the nose to drop. Now that I had mentally justified the nose drop off the cat, I reset all of the warning lights and everything appeared normal. Since other aircraft were already approaching the break to make their 1700 Charlie time, I remained at 300' to stay below the breaking aircraft.

Unbeknownst to either of us, the last bombay fuel can had failed during the catapult shot remaining on deck and ripping a hole in the remaining fuel cans. The result of this damage was a very aggressive and hot fire that was being fed by the remaining 4,000 pounds of JP5 being blown out under pressure by compressor bleed air. Located in this area, in the linear bombay (between the engines), were the aircraft hydraulics and sophisticated flight control

systems (pitch augmentation, yaw augmentation, electric flight etc.) that allowed the pilot to easily control the aircraft. As heat increased in the linear bombay, things began to rapidly deteriorate.

Aircraft configuration was now landing gear up with flaps / droops 30 / 25 Ten to fifteen seconds after we became airborne, Departure control transmitted:

**“Spertip 605 you appear to have lost a fuel tank . . . “ Almost immediately, Art said: “I have a Fire Warning Light.” I looked down and responded: “Roger, fire light #1 and #2 engines.”**

As Art repeated his indications to me, I began to pull the throttles out of AB and tried to commence a climb. However, before I could do anything, the aircraft began to buffet slightly and I felt what I thought were explosions coming from the aft part of the aircraft. Simultaneously, the Caution and Warning enunciator panels lit up like a Christmas tree and the stick froze pitching the aircraft about 20 degrees nose down and causing a very violent starboard roll that I estimated to be approximately 300 to 400 degrees a second.

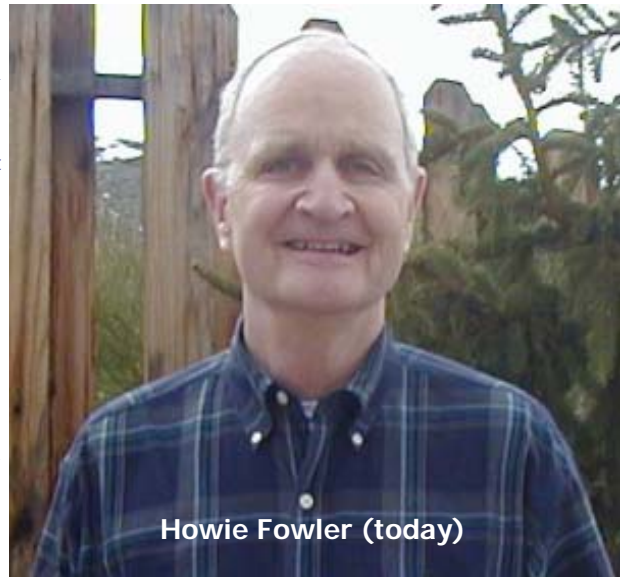
It was abundantly clear that this aircraft had become an “un-reusable container” that we needed to exit – and now! I told Art to “**Eject! Eject!**” and on the second command to eject, I initiated ejection by pulling the port turn-and-pull ejection knob located by my left knee. The aircraft attitude at the time of ejection initiation was about 90° right wing down with the nose about 20 to 30° below the horizon. Unless someone has experienced this type of event, it is difficult to explain the effect that adrenalin has in dramatically slowing (and almost freezing) the passage of time.

Although the following sequence of events took place in less than 2 to 3 seconds, it seemed like an eternity. Everything that happened next seemed to take place in slow motion – very slow motion.

The first thing I remember after initiating ejection was the sound of rushing air after the canopy was blown off the aircraft. Now, with the horizon well above my head, I remember pulling the turn-and-pull ejection handle again thinking that my ejection seat was not working.

In the RA-5C, when the pilot initiates ejection, although both canopies are jettisoned simultaneously, the back seat is fired first and then, following a  $\frac{3}{4}$  second delay, to avoid seat collision, the front seat sequence is initiated. Believe me, that was and still is to this day, the longest  $\frac{3}{4}$  of a second I've ever experienced.

The aircraft airspeed and altitude at the time of my ejection was approximately 250 knots and less than 300 feet. Art was ejected from the aircraft while it was inverted and I departed either laterally or



**Howie Fowler (today)**

slightly upright. Pilot statements from other aircraft who observed the accident confirmed that the aircraft actually made two complete rolls prior to water impact.

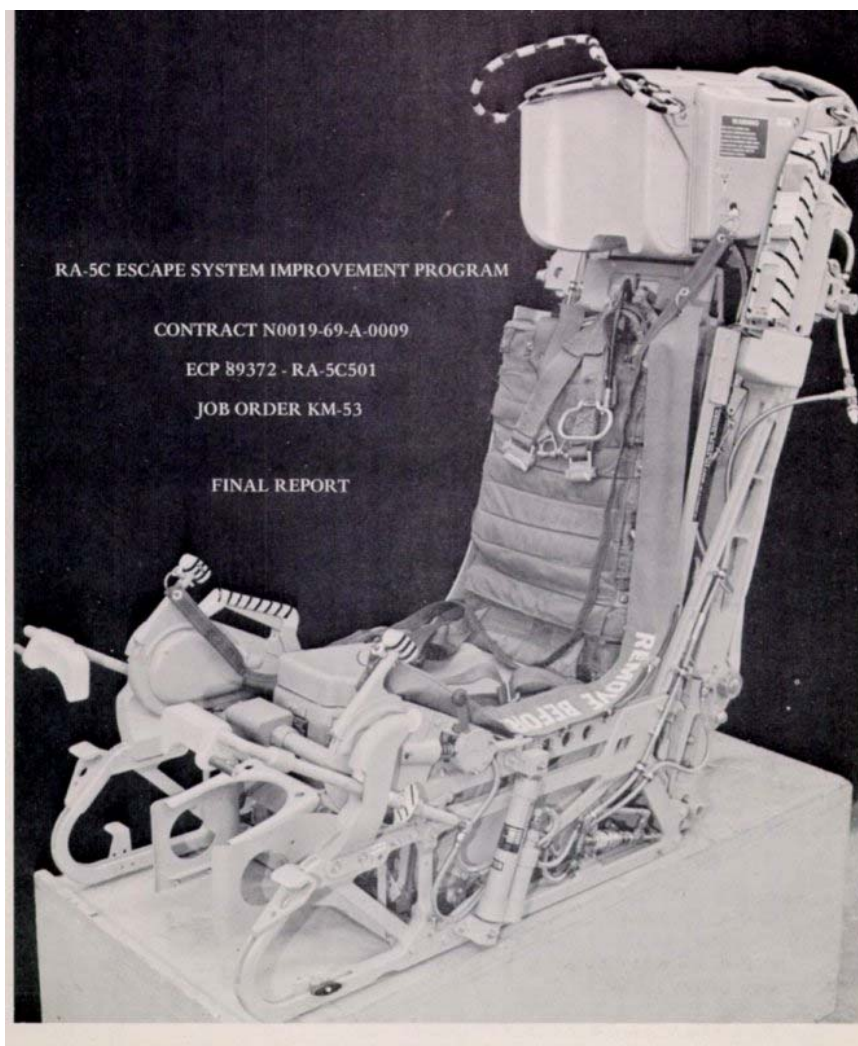
I remember the ejection seat bottoming out, body positioning taking place (inertial reel firing and pulling me back into the seat), the mechanical leg restraints rotating down to secure my ankles, and smoke from the black powder charge filling the cockpit. The black powder charge is what lifts the seat above the canopy rails prior to the

## RA-5C Ejection Story (The Pilot's View)

ignition of the ejection seat rockets. And then, bang, the seat rockets ignited and I was on my way out of the aircraft. The vertical acceleration forces were high but smooth. I lost my helmet almost immediately during the ejection and remember seeing the aircraft knife into the water upright and about 30 to 40 degrees nose down immediately in front of me and disappear leaving only boiling water behind. Next, there was a loud pop above my head when the ballistic parachute spreaders fired and blossomed the chute giving me a quick jerk just before to my feet entered the water. After inflating my

LPA (Life Preserver Apparatus) I tried to disconnect myself from the parachute. Although wet slippery flight gloves made the process a bit frustrating, I was very interested in separating myself from the parachute since it was beginning to tangle around my feet and arms while slowly sinking into the ocean.

Although Art was only about 40 to 50 feet away from me, I was unable to see or communicate with him due to the sea state. Since he had been ejected while the aircraft was inverted, he entered the water head first and continued to 10 to 15 feet under



water. The inverted ejection and related forces also temporarily incapacitated the right side of his body delaying the inflation his LPA and causing him to swallow a lot of water.

Even though we were a mile to a mile and a

Angel arrived (call sign "Indian Girl") overhead the crash scene very quickly and rescued Art and then came back to pick me up. The rescue helicopter pilot and crew were a welcome sight and they all performed admirably. Art and I were flown back to the USS Constellation flight deck and taken to sick bay for evaluation and treatment.

Today, Art is a very successful, well known Estate Tax Attorney in New Jersey.

### P.S.

That was April 21, 1973. Now fast forward to January 1998 (almost 25 years later). Our son Todd was a "Firstie" in his last year at the U.S. Naval Academy when he had called me on the telephone to share a story with me about one of his classes. He explained that, from time to time, the Academy invites guest professors from NASA and other organizations to speak and teach at the Academy. Todd said that he had the opportunity to visit briefly with his instructor, John Burks after class. During the conversation when John said that he had been a Naval Aviator, Todd mentioned to him

that I was also a retired Naval Aviator and had flown the RA-5C. Since the Vigilante community was very small, John asked several more questions to determine if our paths had crossed during his Naval tour. Long story short, John Burks, then LT

John Burks was the pilot in command of the Angel that plucked both Art and I out of the Gulf of Tonkin that fateful day. John's son, Michael Burks was also Todd's classmate in the class of



3-Can Fuel Train

half away from the ship, it was immense as it passed by us. Of course this was the first time I had ever looked at an aircraft carrier from water level.

During air ops, there is always an airborne helicopter referred to as the "Angel" stationed aft and starboard of the carrier. The

1998. Now you tell me – what are the odds of that happening to your son 25 years later and 3000 miles away from home! Small world . . . . .