

UNBROKEN CHAIN OF EVENTS

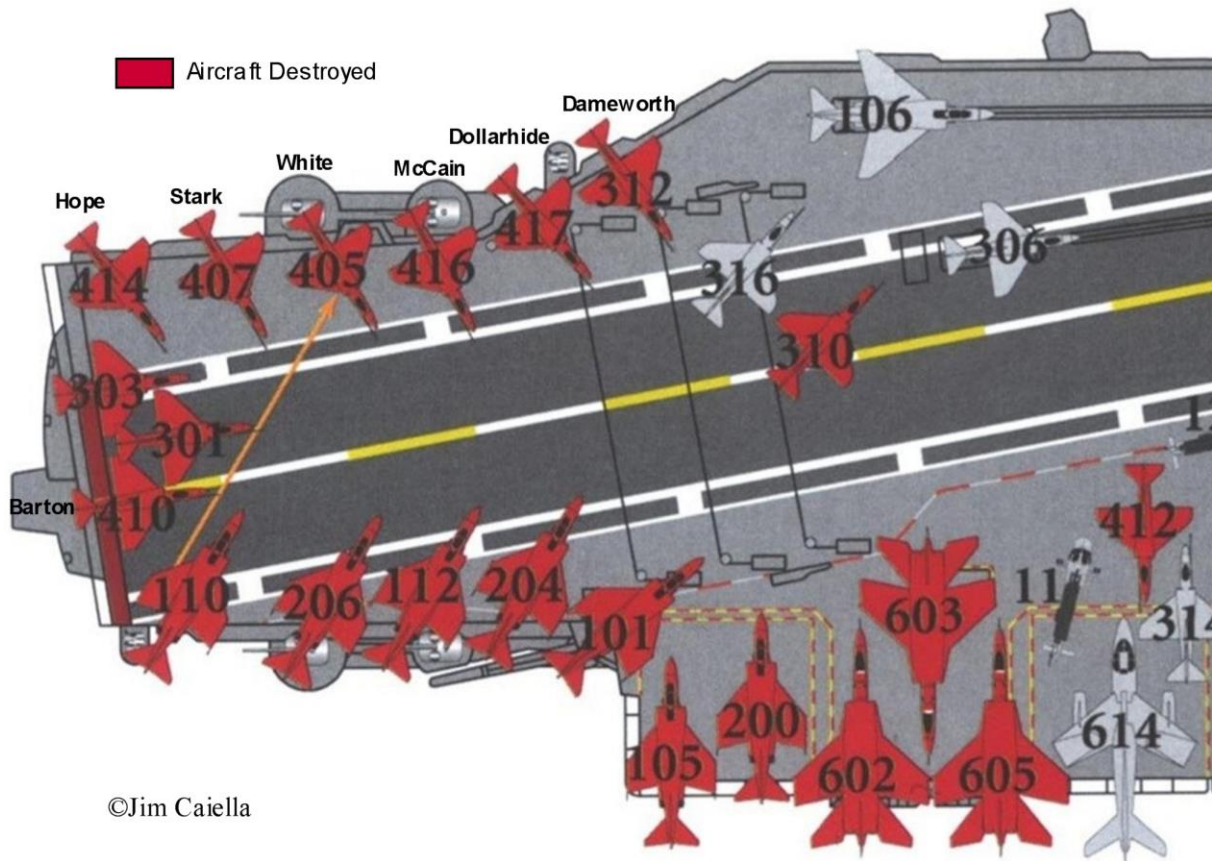
A personal account of the USS Forrestal Fire

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July 29, 1967 – “Fire on the Flight Deck”

It was our fifth day of combat operations on “Yankee Station.” Unlike most arriving air wings, we had bypassed “Dixie Station” and the normal warm up period of close air support missions in South Vietnam. Air Wing Seventeen started right into flying large formation “Alpha” strikes to the more hostile North Vietnam targets. Today, I was scheduled on the 1100 launch, a 22 plane strike group, plus support aircraft.

Down in the VA-46 Clansmen’s ready room, Gary Stark, Fred White, Denny Barton and I began to brief our part of the strike as a “division” of four. Herb Hope and John McCain were there briefing also, but as a different strike element. We had just learned we’d be dropping bombs left over from the Korean War. The M-65 was a 1,000# “fat” bomb, designed to be carried by propeller aircraft. We’d never seen these things and were unfamiliar, but someone gave us the correct gunsight setting, we finished the briefing and walked across the passageway to ride the escalator to the flight deck.



My A-4E, AA 417, was spotted on the port side, close to the LSO platform and as I began to preflight, I was taken back at the sight of the rusted M-65s on either wing. They were large in diameter and didn't seem to have the normal bumpy, insulated exterior seen on modern day bombs.

Nomex flight suits were not in the supply system at this point, so we were wearing Marine fatigues. My sleeves were turned up and I felt somewhat confident about the mission. My post engine start checks were completed and the Plane Captain had removed the ladder, some of the tie down chains, and departed the flight deck. With my canopy open in the one hundred degree heat, I was looking toward the VA-106 A-4 parked upwind and to my left. In the cockpit was “Crash” Dameworth, a friend.

Suddenly, above the noise of engines and wind, I heard a heavy “whump!” Due to no fault of the pilot, a Zuni rocket was accidentally fired from an F-4 across the flight deck, striking the 400 gallon external fuel tank of Fred White’s A-4. This resulted in a violent fuel explosion and fire surrounding our airplanes. (*When the F-4’s first generator was energized during engine start, a current had surged out to the already armed rocket pod on his left wing, firing one rocket.*)

Looking towards “Crash,” I remember the fear on his face as he looked past me. I snapped my head around to see the flight deck engulfed in fire, with people scrambling out of the inferno. One of our VA-46 mechanics back peddled out of the flames just ahead of my right wing, terribly injured and burned. I was awash with panic. Throttle off...disconnect my torso harness...oxygen hose disconnected while rising up...and I literally dove out the left side of my cockpit. Eight feet later, I hit the deck like a bag of sand, breaking my hip and arm.



One or two people came to my aid, helping me stand and move to the center of the flight deck. Suddenly, they were gone and I was limping along solo when a “Green Shirt” from VF-11, Joe Patane, held out his arms. I lunged and we both fell to the deck in the vicinity of the number three arresting wire. My feet were now pointed toward the fire, maybe fifty feet away. The scene was horrific with people, airplanes and weapons engulfed in the fire. I could see that McCain was out of his airplane, but Gerry Stark and Fred White were still in their open cockpits.

Charges in the “ejector feet” of our bomb racks began to activate in the fire and bombs started to fall unarmed to the deck. However, due to the age of their high explosive material (HE), high order detonations quickly ensued in the burning jet fuel and in short order, the first of nine M-65 detonations occurred just those few feet away. 90 seconds had passed since the rocket had launched.

It had only been a few seconds since Patane had put out his arms. I don’t recall any noise, just an instantaneous and violent shock wave that slid me up the deck a foot or so. I took shrapnel hits to my foot and hip. A glance upward showed the sky filled with debris. I began to rise and Patane said to stay down, but determined to leave the scene, I ran/hobbled my way forward and dove under a Phantom parked aft of the island. Someone came out and helped me to safety.

Just inside an island hatch, my flight gear was cut away and I was carried by Butch Massey (VA-65) down numerous ladders to Sick Bay Ward 2 on the second deck. The ship shuddered as the M-65s continued to explode. Brave crewmembers battled the blaze and just over my head, through the steel of the hangar deck, I could hear the noise of people yelling and pushing anything that could burn or explode overboard. Sick bay quickly filled with terribly injured friends and shipmates.



The battle to put out fires and save the ship continued for much of the day. Most, like me, were just survivors, but heroes abounded. All experienced their own version of this life changing experience. When it was over, one

hundred and thirty four shipmates were gone...Gerry, Fred and Denny among them. I was the only survivor from our flight.

Looking Back

It didn't have to happen! The Navy's worst peacetime accident could have been avoided or mitigated by corrective action at any one of several decision points. The following is a list of events that led to the accident.

- As we proceeded to the combat zone a decision was made to short circuit normal arming procedures in exchange for expedience in meeting the "Alpha Strike" schedule.
 - Cannon plugs used with rocket pods were connected without the airplanes pointed in a safe direction.
 - It was felt that the arming safety pin in the back of the pods was enough protection, but these pins were already known by many to malfunction, if the wind was blowing the attached warning flag.
 - Deviating further, final arming of weapons was accomplished while airplanes were taxiing. (*Just the day before the fire, an "AO" caught his foot under an F-4 main tire while arming rockets. He then fell in front of the wheel and lost his arm as the airplane continued to taxi over him. I was in the hospital with this sailor and know the story as related by him.*)
- Someone at a very high level in the Department of Defense decided to expend bombs that had been in storage since the Korean War.
 - Bombs from that era did not have a proper thermal protective coating.
 - The high explosive (HE) material had become unstable due to storage conditions and time.
 - These bombs had been "high-lined" from an ammunition ship to the Forrestal the night before. One of the carrier's weapons department supervisors expressed serious concern about the age and volatility of the M-65s.



A "JAG" investigation was completed, with the report containing some 7,000 pages. VA-46 and VA-106 had lost eleven Skyhawks and most surviving A-4s were damaged to some degree. I remember the total airplane losses in Air Wing Seventeen were around sixty million dollars. The cost of repairing Forrestal was huge and the loss of life, devastating. Over time, the Navy took many corrective actions as a result of the Forrestal accident...life saving procedures and policies that are still in place today, over fifty years later.