

WESTIN - WESTERMAN SAGA
Ted Been

In the spring of 1966, VA-85 was deployed in South-East Asia (SEA) aboard USS Kitty Hawk, conducting strikes against North Vietnam. One afternoon VA-85's CO and myself in Buckeye 1, and Lt. Bill Westerman and Ltjg Brian Westin in Buckeye 2 were scheduled for road recce in Route Package 2, armed with MK-82s.

Just prior to manning aircraft, a report came into the ship that a bunch of barges were massed near the mouth of the Vinh river. The staff (CTF-77), being short of officers with experience in tactical aviation (TACAIR), went ballistic and changed our flight's target to these massed barges, and our ordnance load to NAPALM. In those days a NAPALM drop had to be executed at a very low altitude and airspeed in order to ensure detonation. We screamed bloody murder about our ordnance change (the target was great!), but to no avail. So we launched on the one and only NAPALM mission to be conducted (as far as I know) north of Route Package 1 in North Vietnam.

The launch and rendezvous were normal with only one small problem with Buckeye 2. Brian's radio system evidently had a short somewhere in the circuit and every time he pressed the ICS button he transmitted on the UHF. This was considered a minor annoyance, so we proceeded to the target. The briefed target tactic was that once Buckeye one commenced his run, Westy would assume a loose trail position and make his own independent run. We were then to rendezvous over the water and proceed back to marshall. We got to the target area, which was only 2 or 3 miles inland, and the barges were there, as briefed, ready for the slaughter. We made our run (all ordnance on target, of course) and pulled off left to head out to the rendezvous area. At this point we heard Brian ask "Are you hit?" The CO and I looked at each other, thinking he was asking us if we were hit and he was telling us something we didn't know.

Just as we started to reply, Brian made his MAYDAY call stating that the pilot was hit and that HE, THE BOMBARDIER WAS FLYING THE AIRPLANE out to feet wet. Brian was flying from the right seat! Of course, the flying was a little erratic, but effective, and we made a join up with them in a loose formation at about 7,000 feet over the water.

A NVN farmer had probably shot at the plane and a single rifle bullet, about the size of a 30-30, had entered the aircraft through the lower left aft portion of the canopy and hit Westy's shoulder. It probably would have been a clean wound, but the bullet shattered against Westy's Koch parachute fastener and ripped his whole left chest open. Westy's left arm and hand were completely

immobilized, so he told Brian to take over the stick while Westy used his right hand to manipulate the throttles. Brian was a very busy boy at this point trying to fly, communicate, and take care of Westy. At this point, Westy was experiencing cycles of considerable pain and tunnel vision. His vision would blur and narrow down to a constricted tunnel and then expand back to normal. Finally, Brian remembered he had a miniature of the Flight Surgeon's brandy in his navigation bag. He broke this open and fed it to Westy, who revived enough at this point to realize he had better do something quick. Flying all the way to DaNang and trying to land was simply out of the question. He told Brian to eject, but Brian chose to wait until Westy ejected. Westy then jettisoned the canopy and ejected. By the time Brian got himself ready for ejection, the airplane had gone on about 5 or 6 miles.

Meanwhile, back in Buckeye 1, I switched to Guard and broadcast a MAYDAY with our location, which was about 10 miles east of Tiger Island. Red Crown answered immediately and got the SAR helo on the way. We were still flying a loose formation and saw the canopy separate from Buckeye 2. We saw one ejection, lost the parachute, and saw the aircraft go into the water. Finally we saw a raft and circled it. Since the CO and I had only seen one ejection we assumed that that was Brian and Westy had gone in with the airplane. What had really happened was that we saw Westy's ejection, lost him, and then picked up Brian (who had ejected 5 or 6 miles later) in his raft, thinking the whole time that it was the same person!

At this point, the Search and Rescue (SAR) A-1D SPAD flight arrived on scene. The SARCAP was VA-115 (ARABS) from CAG 13 on Kitty Hawk. They were the last SPAD squadron to deploy to North Vietnam, prior to their transition to the A-6A. The flight leader relieved us as the SAR Commander. He located Brian in his raft and vectored the helo in for pickup. We watched Brian's rescue. The helo pilot then came on the air to say he had successfully rescued Brian, and that Brian said the pilot had ejected before him. This was the first indication we had that Westy was still alive.

Naturally an intensive search by all the aircraft in the area was set up to find Westy. After about 5 minutes, the SAR Commander saw a tracer cross his nose, dropped down and there was Westy. What happened was that Westy, after he got in the water and out of his chute, was unable to locate his raft. (It was lost in the ejection. Westy had tucked his dead arm under the lap belt to keep it from flailing and thinks this action may have inadvertently jettisoned his raft). In the meantime, he's watching all these planes and helos flying all over the Tonkin Gulf, but none are anywhere near him. Getting desperate, Westy somehow managed to get his pencil flare out and armed with one round. He vowed to shoot down the first plane that came in range. When the SAR Commander set out to find Westy, he happened to fly right over him, at which point Westy aimed his pencil flare directly at the aircraft and that was the tracer that led to his location.

The helo was vectored in over Westy posthaste and the sling was dropped for pickup. Westy had been bleeding profusely and was in the middle of a pool of blood. Due to his wound, Westy was unable to get into the sling. The helo did not have a swimmer on board, and Brian, who by this time had stripped off his torso harness and was wearing only his "G" suit and flight suit, ordered the sling operator to lower him into the water. Brian then got Westy into the sling and Westy was brought on board the helo successfully. When they tried to lower the sling to pick up Brian, the winch jammed and could not be operated. Westy was in desperate need of medical attention, so Brian waved the helo off. As the helo departed, it called in the backup helo and went back to Red Crown, leaving Brian in the bloody water. After several terrifying minutes in the water with no flotation device and getting pretty tired, Brian remembered a procedure he had learned in water survival school. Use your g-suit as a flotation device. He used his "G" suit as a flotation device by unzipping it and manually blowing it up through the plug which attached the suit to the aircraft. This filled the bladders of the g-suit, thus serving as a flotation device. Sharks had been sighted in the area and Brian floated in that bloody pool of water for an eternity (in reality about fifteen minutes) until the backup helo picked him up and returned him to Kitty Hawk.

After this incident a lot of time and ideas were devoted to trying to determine how one crewmember could successfully eject the other crewmember. This included tying a piece of rope around one of the ejection handles so the other crewmember could pull it and thereby fire the seat. However, things happened so fast after that it was doubtful if the able crewmember would be able to let go the rope fast enough to save his own hand or arm. A lot of force was needed without the direct leverage a crewmember had in pulling his own handle. Eventually, after several years, the command ejection system was built into the A-6E.

Westy had a lengthy and painful recovery, but went on to retire as a captain, logging over 1,000 carrier landings and commanding an LPH. Brian went on to a career in EA-6Bs and was awarded a Navy Cross for his heroic actions in this incident.