



Jim Tobias, his F6F Hellcat, and Montauk Lighthouse

## Montauk Lighthouse Landing

*by Jim Tobias, as told to Jerry Tobias*

The winter of 1944 was typical for New England: cold, snowy, icy...miserable. This was to be our last week at our Navy training base at Groton, Connecticut, after which our unit was heading west to rendezvous with our new home, the recently-repaired aircraft carrier U.S.S. Lexington.

This last Saturday at Groton, however, was also a training day. I was scheduled for an early morning aircraft recognition class, and was to then fly an F6F Hellcat gunnery training flight in our target-towing area southeast of Long Island. The aircraft recognition class ran late, though, so I arrived at the flight line just as the other five Hellcats in our six-ship flight were taking off.

I was met on the flight line by maintenance personnel who told me that the aircraft I had been assigned to fly was "down" for maintenance (this was not a surprise, as many of our training airplanes were "battle-weary" Hellcats that had returned from the fleet). I was told, however, that the F6F parked in the next spot had also been "down," but was now "OK"...and was ready to go.

I prepared the substitute Hellcat for flight, and was soon airborne and in pursuit of the others. However, just as I joined the formation, one of my squadron mates broke radio silence to tell me that I was trailing smoke.

Simultaneously with his call, oil began to wash over my front windscreen and I began to lose engine power. I knew that I had to get the airplane on the ground as soon as possible.

My first thought was that Groton, on the south shore of Connecticut, was not a good recovery option. First of all, it was located some 32 miles across the water from the north shore of Long Island. And second, the south end of the runway sat on a bit of a cliff, which - in my ever-decreasing power situation - was not a comforting thought.

The nearby south shore of Long Island was all rocks and sand dunes, which also ruled out an attempted beach landing. Most concerning, though, was the thought of ditching. The Atlantic was

frigid that time of year, and we had been warned that our survival time in such waters would only be about 26 minutes. And, the likelihood of a rescue within that time period, of course, was nil. The only decent emergency landing option that remained, therefore, was the narrow road that ran along the south shore of Long Island toward the Montauk Lighthouse.

My engine problems started at an altitude of only about 6,000 feet, which was our normal target practice altitude. At that low of an altitude and at the rate of my continuing loss of power, I had very little maneuvering time and very little margin for error. I put my wheels down on the base leg, but the pilot of the patrolling Douglas SBD Dauntless that followed me down suggested (correctly) that I should keep my wheels *up* for an emergency landing on such a narrow road.

Thankfully, my approach to the road worked out well since I was experiencing a nearly total loss of power as I approached the Long Island coast. By this time, oil covered so much of the windscreen that I could not see forward at all. I looked sideways out of my open cockpit canopy, lined up the best I could, and held the airplane in a near-normal, nose-high attitude to touch down as slowly as possible. The airplane ungracefully smacked the road, skidded along on its belly and rapidly decelerated.

Shortly after touchdown, I slid over an unseen bridge that spanned a small ravine. The bridge's guardrails tore at the bottom side of the wings and spun my Hellcat around backwards. I came to a stop about two blocks west of Montauk Lighthouse, quickly secured the cockpit, and exited my still-aft-facing Hellcat. From leaving the formation to leaving the cockpit had only taken about ten minutes.

Men from Montauk Lighthouse arrived at my location in just a few minutes. They took me back to the lighthouse and graciously offered me a cup of coffee. It was the foulest concoction I had ever tasted. They later took me to an Army field from which I was finally able to hitch a ride in an Army training plane back to my base.

As with most every incident, several valuable lessons can be learned from this experience.

1). *Never delay a response to a deteriorating situation.* If I had delayed my attempted recovery by even a few minutes, I probably would not have been here to tell this story.

2). *Evaluate all possible options as thoroughly but quickly as possible, then choose the option that appears to provide the greatest likelihood of success and/or survival - even if it's only the best of several poor options.* In my scenario, the road along the coast (even with its unknown bridge) was the only reasonable option available.

3). *Employ the best possible procedures and techniques for the given situation from all personal knowledge and experience AND the collective input of others.* The SBD pilot's advice to make sure that I brought my wheels back up for the emergency landing, for example, was very valuable input.

4). *Emergencies are often accompanied by ingredients not covered in training* (such as my oil-covered windscreen and continuing loss of power). Creative improvisation may be required.

5). Finally, after successfully recovering from *any* incident at *any* unfamiliar facility, *never, ever drink the coffee!*

Montauk Lighthouse is now a museum and historical site. I understand that it is well worth visiting if you ever have the opportunity. To me, though, it is more than just a lighthouse; it is a towering monument to how blessed I was to walk away from this potentially disastrous incident without a scratch! ■

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*Note: After safely returning from the war, Jim Tobias went back to farming in central Kansas and never flew again. His son, Jerry, flew for the U. S. Air Force, Alaska Airlines and Mutual of Omaha.*