

Jack Dunn's Hellcat Emergency Landing (or "To jump or not to jump?")

This story was related to me by Jack on two different occasions, but I neglected to get it on the interview videos (I'm sure there are more incidents like this one that never got recorded). Today (2/24/16) I went over to Jack's to make sure I have the details correct. Here's the story.

In 1943 during operational training at Melbourne NAS Florida, Jack was flying a F6F Hellcat in formation with his friend Ted. They were NW of Melbourne over the Florida everglades at about 10,000 feet when all of a sudden Jack's windows fogged over, and the cockpit filled up with heavy mist that had a very strong smell of gasoline. Jack was afraid the plane would blow up, so immediately switched off the engine. He opened the canopy and the gasoline vapors cleared out.



So then he began worrying that he had done the wrong thing by shutting down the engine. Should he restart the engine, and possibly blow up, or should he bail out and maybe get blamed for losing a plane? He looked down and could see no survivable landing place in the everglades. After stewing about it a while he finally decided better to lose a plane than his life. [Jack would later in life develop his "there's no maybe" philosophy of coping with emergencies]. So he prepared to bail out.

Jack unbuckled everything holding him in the cockpit, checked that his parachute was securely fastened, trimmed the plane for a straight glide (the Hellcat was good at this), and managed to climb out onto the wing. He said this was not as easy as it sounds!

Jack then sat down on the sandpaper "cat walk" and began sliding his way back to the trailing edge of the Hellcat's wing (I asked him what he held on to and he couldn't remember). When he got to the trailing edge with his lower legs hanging and looked down, in his mind he saw hundreds of alligators looking up with their mouths wide open! Maybe this wasn't such a good idea after all! As he sat there trying to talk himself into jumping, he noticed what looked like a white sandy strip of dry land in the marsh. "Maybe I can land after all!"



So Jack worked his way back up the wing, and back into the cockpit. After getting himself settled back in, he radioed Ted as to his intention to make a wheels-up landing on the sand bar. So he made his gliding approach and as he got closer the "land" looked to be all sand, but a little on the short side. He set up to touch down as close to the beginning of the strip as possible. He came in as slow as possible as if he were ditching in the water (which he later twice did). The Hellcat eased on to the sand ever so gently, with its wheels up and tail hook retracted. The plane slid along the "beach" and came to a stop just before the end of it.

Jack jumped out, still afraid of a fiery explosion. After he stopped shaking, he looked back along the beach. There in the sand was a perfectly straight line gauged by the tail wheel. About halfway down the tail-wheel line was what Jack described as a "hook shaped rock" sticking up. Jack checked over the plane and discovered that rock had ripped out most of the underside of the plane, otherwise it was undamaged. If sparks did fly when that happened, they didn't ignite the leaking gas! That rock also explained why he came to a stop while still on the sand bar.

Jack sat on the sand, wondering if anybody was going to come rescue him. In that Ted had flown over after the landing and wagged his wings, Jack figured Ted would report his location. Finally darkness arrived, so Jack made himself a "bed" in the sand and went to sleep (dreaming about alligators).

At sunrise Jack woke up and began to worry if he had done the right thing. The Navy might be mad about the loss of plane. Maybe they would even court martial him for not trying to get back to Melbourne! As he mulled over a mix of remorse and "lucky to be alive", he began hearing a strange sound far off in the distance. Slowly, over a period of over an hour, the sound got louder and louder. It sounded like a train was coming through the everglades somehow! What the hell was it? Suddenly, with a deafening noise, a huge mechanical creature broke out of the swamp and headed straight for him! As it came to a stop, Jack studied something he had never seen before! It was a huge barge-like thing with monstrous balloon tires on it, and the largest V-8 engine he had ever seen! They picked up Jack, and told him the machine had been specially built to recover downed military pilots from the everglades!

As it turned out, none of Jack's superiors even mentioned the incident. No criticism or praise – nothing. Jack flew the next day. To his knowledge the Hellcat was never recovered.

== Roy Pettit ==