

## Ten necessary things to stay alive

Get my head back or I'll snap my neck. Pull my elbow into my stomach or I'll pull the stick back and spin in. Take my feet off the brakes or I'll blow both tires and can't land.

I sat in the ready room of the aircraft carrier waiting for my plane's turn to be catapulted off the deck. My mind was racing to remember the ten things necessary for me to stay alive. This was my first time to be catapulted off a carrier and I could remember only nine of the ten things!

"Barker! Man your plane!" shouted a voice over the squawk box. I grabbed my helmet, clanked down the metal stairs taking two at a time and jumped into the cockpit.

Six of the crew pushed my jet backward onto the narrow platform elevator that would raise it to the flight deck. I hated this part. It felt like I was hanging in space off the side of the ship, with no railing to keep my million dollar plane (with its nice pilot) from crashing into the sea below.

At the whistle I stepped on the brakes. Unexpectedly, the jet lurched backward. Carriers always launch aircraft into the wind. The ship was traveling at around 33 knots, so there was a 40 to 50 knot wind coming down that deck. That wind surged under my left wing violently, lifting the nose of the plane into the air.

I gasped, leaning forward as if to counterbalance the plane. I saw terror in the eyes of the sailors in front of me, and knew there were only moments before I would

careen over the edge of the carrier. One of the crew jumped up and grabbed the nose wheel. The plane lurched back to the deck. I exhaled heavily, not realizing till then I had been holding my breath.

Everyone resumed his position as if nothing had happened, and the elevator began to whine as it lifted me to the flight deck. I was shook, but in my mind I started rehearsing the list of ten things I needed to remember. I counted them out, murmuring to myself as I turned up my engines, and taxied to the catapult.

“Ready?” the officer signaled to me.

Everything is timed on an aircraft carrier. Every twenty five seconds a plane is supposed to take off. Right catapult fires. Jet positioned on the left, then left catapult fires. It’s the catapult officer’s job to get the jet launched, but he can’t “shoot you” till you salute.

Take my feet off the brakes or I will blow both tires and can’t land... I could only remember nine things. What was the tenth! The catapult officer kept signaling impatiently. I was throwing off his perfect timing. What was that last thing? I put my head back and saluted anyway.

Bam! The G forces pulled on my body as the catapult launched me across the deck. Number ten came back to me with frightening clarity. A little metal bar had to be pulled up and gripped with the throttle when the plane is catapulted. If not, the jet will be thrown off the ship, but the throttle will come off and the pilot will not have enough power to get airborne.

In a panic I jammed the throttle up. Too late! I shot off the deck and dropped like lead.

If a plane goes into the water, the next thing that happens is the aircraft carrier runs over you. I could hear my engines building, but I wasn’t getting enough power.

————— *Ten necessary things to stay alive* —————

In a prop plane you get immediate power, but in a jet, once you get below a certain percent, you can push the throttle up, but nothing will happen. I thought flying was the ultimate freedom. My life flashed before my eyes.