

from stem to stern. We had a lot of people from the air wing on the 03 level, just below the flight deck. Since we were on a 12 hour basis, many of them would be locked in their compartments.¹⁶

The pressure wave from the explosion was felt throughout the ship. The combined 60 pounds of explosive power in the Zuni pod sent numerous hot fragments ahead to the right and left of NG-105. To the right the starboard wing drop tank was partially blown, leading to a fireball engulfing NG-105, the deck, and spilling into the port aft catwalk, destroying shipboard communication circuits in the area. Fragments holed all four Phantoms parked along the round-down. To the left of NG-105, the F-4J (NG-106), KA-3B (NG-614), and A-7B (NG-310) were also holed. The MD3A no. 6 huffer driver, Airman AN John R. Webster from V1 division, was killed instantly. The pilot of NG-106, Maj. John Hefferman, jumped out of the cockpit with a wounded arm. He was assisted over to the island by 106's plane captain. The pilot and RIO aboard NG-105 (Bu. No. 155785), Lt. j.g. Jim Berry and Lt. j.g. Buddy Pyeatt, both died as a consequence of the fireball, Pyeatt instantly and Berry months later in hospital.

When Skipper Lee arrived on the bridge he witnessed NG-105 surrounded by flames. On the opposite side of the deck another Phantom NG-103 was sitting "in" fire, and all the Phantoms along the round-down were obscured by smoke and fire. There was a serious situation looming, with around 30 500-pound bombs and 40 Zuni rockets hanging from planes' wings in fly-3. He immediately ordered "left standard rudder," maintaining a speed of about 10 knots, so that



wind over the deck could be used to carry smoke and flames out aft of the ship. The only problem was that the associated list to starboard led burning fuel to track over towards the four A-7s on the starboard side of fly-3.

We had about 15 or 20 aircraft on the after part of the flight deck, all loaded with full fuel, full ammunition, Zuni rockets and bombs. We had this horrendous blaze going. There wasn't any doubt in my mind that the safety of the ship was paramount, and what we should do is go to GQ, flood the hangar deck with the overhead sprinkler system, and try to prevent the fire from spreading from the after part of the flight deck, to the rest of the ship. Because once those fires get going with the minimum fire fighting equipment that we had on the flight deck, there isn't anything you can do about it. Also metals like aluminium and magnesium

The darkest hour for Big E. Enterprise was steaming 70 miles southwest of Pearl Harbor, heading 090 degrees, speed 11 knots, with sea state 3-seconds, 3-foot swell at 310 degrees. There was an 8/10 cloud cover ceiling at 3,000 feet and visibility was 10 miles at 0800, just prior to launch of the second event of the day. The calm routine of the morning was shattered 19 minutes later.

USN, National Museum of Naval Aviation



Planes in Fly 3 caught fire in frightening synchrony. As deck crew fought bravely between explosions they were met with walls of flame. Capt. Kent Lee steered the ship into wind to push the fire and smoke off the aft of the flight deck, and Air Boss Cmdr. Stollenwerck coordinated the flight deck crew from the island, encouraging them to fight fires, to cool off planes that were at risk of igniting, to move aircraft forward, and to retreat when explosions were imminent or had occurred.

Lt. j.g. Ned Baumer, courtesy of Tailhook Association Baumer Collection

begin to burn at very high temperatures, so piles of molten metal were growing back there.¹⁷

Just 20 seconds after the initial blast, NG-105's portside Zuni pod exploded, this time making three 1-foot-diameter holes in the flight deck. Immediately following the second explosion an announcement via 1MC, operated from the captain's bridge, was heard in every space around the ship: "EXPLOSIONS ON THE FLIGHT DECK! THIS IS NO DRILL, THIS IS NO DRILL! MAN YOUR BATTLE STATIONS! GENERAL QUARTERS, GENERAL QUARTERS! REPEAT! ALL HANDS MAN YOUR BATTLE STATIONS. THIS IS NO DRILL, THIS IS NO DRILL! GENERAL QUARTERS, GENERAL QUARTERS! MAN

YOUR BATTLE STATIONS!"¹⁸

The second explosion killed and injured many crew assembled to fight the fire, and set off more fires. Crew trapped at the ramp end of the ship jumped the 60 feet from the flight deck into the sea. In their shock and disbelief some crew assumed that Big E had been hit by the Soviets.

Just forward of the explosion, on cat 3, Lt. j.g. Baumer and Lt. j.g. Wood had been sitting in their idling VF-92 F-4J Phantom at the time of the first explosion:

At 0817, I caught a glimpse of a bright orange-yellow flash reflecting off *Enterprise's* island and heard and felt a muffled explosion. As I turned to look over my right shoulder, I was thinking

that the inspectors had created a very realistic situation and I was wondering what they had done.

At first I couldn't believe what I was seeing – a wall of fire, four or five men running up the deck on fire and other flight deck personnel running towards the explosion. Within seconds, the ship announced a 'Fire on the flight deck' and called for general quarters. I came up on the ICS (intercom system) and told Jack we were shutting down and to clear the aircraft. At the time it seemed like an eternity but, in fact, it was less than 20 seconds! (Several days later we viewed the flight deck PLAT tape and timed our exit from the time of the first explosion until we were clear of the aircraft. That's shutdown, unstrap, pin the ejection seat and exit. Probably the best time I ever did in an emergency egress situation.) ... At this point we ran to just forward of the island. Other aircrews were there and we all expressed tremendous concern for the safety of our squadron mates who had manned the aircraft on the after portion of the ship. The ship had been starting her turn into the wind for the 0830 launch and most of the initial blast and fire was in their direction. As it turned out, only one VF-96 crew perished in the fire, along with quite a few maintenance personnel from VF-92 and 96 – plus ship's company.¹⁹

Up in Pri-Fly, the air boss and his crew had an immediate appreciation of events, looking directly into the eruption from under NG-105 and out into

the middle of the deck. Cmdr. Stollenwerck was commanding officer of the Air department, the air boss. Standing nearby was the VA-145 duty ops officer, Lt. Cmdr. Galbraith. Each squadron assigned a representative to the tower during flight ops, to assist in aircraft emergencies. Galbraith's log provided the following record:

0820 – F-4 on port quarter exploded, fire quickly spread to adjacent aircraft with smoke and fire covering entire stern area.

Explosions were such that they shook entire island and shattered one window in Pri-Fly. The pressure waves were more pronounced than the noise. Fire spread across the stern and forward to #3 and #4 [aircraft elevators] with such speed that all were stunned. Explosions on the fantail caused large chunks of debris to fly clear above the Pri-Fly tower and forward of the island.²⁰

Central to coordination was Pri-Fly, overlooking the blaze and vulnerable to projectiles. Here a projectile can be seen flying up over the island.

Lt. jg. Ned Baumer, courtesy of Tailhook Association Baumer Collection



The crew on the deck were not able to easily see their way through the smoke, fire, and heat. Up in Pri-Fly the air boss and his team were able to direct appropriately, using the 5MC flight deck “bullhorn” system and the SRC-22 “Mickey Mouse” sound-powered sets used by some directors on deck. Capt. Lee’s decision to instantly steer Big E to “wind over deck,” keeping smoke and fire aft, was invaluable. Cmdr. Stollenwerck decisively directed the deck from the instant of the first explosion: “WE’VE GOTTO ISOLATE AND CONTAIN. GET THOSE AIRCRAFT ON #4 ELEVATOR TOWED CLEAR! ... GET THOSE TWIN AGENT UNITS IN ACTION.”²¹

Lt. Cmdr. Galbraith, standing alongside Stollenwerck, watched the evolving disaster, no doubt with the shared terror that bound the crew:

Men and equipment turned to and there were several in the fire when the first ordnance went off. Men

were blown about the deck but recovered and continued fighting.

Immediate action was taken by air boss to direct and control fire parties.

The fire spread to aircraft adjacent to #4 elevator and all the way across the starboard side.

Ordnance continued to blow men and equipment from the scene but they continually returned to equipment. Hose team leaders, and catapult, flight deck, and handling officers lead teams as men fell around from blast and shrapnel.

Fire got worse as the entire fantail was engulfed and ordnance continually exploded.

Hose pressure inadequate, pressure on bow hoses robbed aft.

Lt. Baumer began taking photos soon after he got out of his F-4. Here he looks back toward where his plane had been on cat-3 – it had been quickly towed forward. Just behind the running crewman is A-7B NG-310, which was eventually destroyed, and the large tanker NG-614, which shortly after this photograph was taken caught alight and exploded.

Lt. jg. Ned Baumer, courtesy of Tailhook Association Baumer Collection



Fire crews took hoses and had to step over bodies, some on fire, in their path. Men rolled shipmates over and over to put fires out, one rolled his shipmate out of the fire into another and both were lost. This was on the centerline just aft of #4 elevator.²²

Meanwhile up in the bridge Capt. Lee was analyzing the scene, powerless to do more than watch and coordinate the passage of Big E into wind to clear the deck of obscuring smoke as best he could.

I was on the bridge the entire time, of course. I was monitoring everything that was going on. I was monitoring what was happening on the flight deck, and our Air Officer was running the fire-fighting going on, on the flight deck. I was monitoring what was going on, on the hangar deck to make sure we didn't have a fire down there. I was monitoring

what was going on in the other parts of the ship, fire main pressures. I directed that the water wash-down system be turned on up forward. We couldn't get the valve to turn on the water wash-down system back aft, but it wouldn't have made any difference. That water wash-down system was like pissing in the wind, if you'll pardon the expression.²³

On the flight deck, VF-92 pilot Lt. j.g. Baumer had begun photographing the rapidly evolving scene with his Kodachrome-loaded Pentax SLR, with which he had planned to take aerial snaps of Hawaii during his sortie. He watched in amazement as men put their lives on the line from the outset.

I actually became fascinated by the event: air boss's voice over the flight deck bull horn starting to direct the fire fighting parties; flight deck personnel



Nowhere on deck was safe from bomb explosions, fireballs, and shooting missiles. Shrapnel injured many crew, damaged many aircraft and peppered the island superstructure, penetrating the SPS-32 and -33 panels and embedding in an ECM Dipole aerial on the beehive. Planes were moved forward to Fly 1 and Fly 2 to create a fire-break.

Lt. j.g. Ned Baumer, courtesy of Tailhook Association Baumer Collection



Although this view down to the port side aft flight deck looks relatively free from fire, in a very short time most of the aircraft here, including tanker NG-614, an EKA-3B from VAQ-132 Scorpions, seen at centre of the photo, would be engulfed in flames. ,

Lt. jg. Ned Baumer, courtesy of Tailhook Association Baumer Collection

moving swiftly to pull forward aircraft away from the fire; Captain Lee turning the ship into a quartering breeze so the smoke was taken over the aft starboard portion of the ship; the first launch aircraft flying overhead and what was going through their minds; men on fire; people lying dead or dying on the flight deck. The things that made the greatest impression on me were the scope of the fire, the sounds, the sinking feeling of thinking the ship might not survive.²⁴

The flight deck crew had no time to properly assess the scene, they simply had to wade in and do everything they could as fast as they could to clear the deck of ordnance, and, with ordnance that could not be cleared, keep it cool with fire hoses to prevent further detonation. Just aft of the island, in the traditional “bomb farm” area, there was a multitude of ordnance that was not far from the growing blaze. AO3 Billy Profit quickly recognized the gravity of the situation and with

almost superhuman strength proceeded to rapidly throw all the ordnance off elevator 3 into the sea. “EVERYTHING OVER, SKIDS AND ALL! GET IT OFF, GET IT OFF!”²⁵

As Baumer described the scene:

The initial minutes were very chaotic until the Air Boss started to take control of the situation. I witnessed numerous times where the boss, with his steady calming voice, encouraged the damage control crews into hot spots to cool down areas where bombs might be ready to cook-off in low-order explosions. The men would be in position fighting the fire, then there would be an explosion and blast sending fire and debris everywhere knocking men to the deck – some were knocked out, others catching fire – hoses everywhere, the men trying to help each other, heroic efforts to save one another, to save the aircraft, the ship!

The Air Boss would call them back from the explosions, then as if launching another attack, he would psych them up again to go back in to fight the fires. He would say things like, “It looks like the A-7 is about to blow up,” and would move the crews back, then encourage them forward once again after the explosion had taken place.

Several times explosions occurred just after the crews were back in fighting the fire and they would all be knocked down, get up, grab a buddy and run for their lives. Many didn’t make it.

I can’t recount the numerous individual tales of heroism, but there were untold acts of