

The crucible event of my life is marked with three words: “Eject! Eject! Eject!” Major Harold Blot, USMC, spoke these words just before he pulled the yellow and black-striped ejection seat handle that initiated our violent departure from our aircraft. Crucible events are life-changing occurrences that are frequently traumatic and almost always unexpected. In my case, the ejection set in motion a series of events that changed my outlook on life, my career in the Navy, and my leadership philosophy. The importance of taking care of the people who work for me was strongly reinforced, as were the importance of making ethical decisions and remaining adaptable in the face of tumultuous change.

When my alarm clock clicked on early in the morning of 6 January 1999, I was well on my way toward fulfilling my childhood dream of becoming a naval aviator. I was assigned to Training Squadron Nine (VT-9), stationed at Naval Air Station (NAS) Meridian, Mississippi. At the time, VT-9 flew the T-2C Buckeye, a twin engine jet trainer that the US Navy had used for about forty years. I was working my way through the intermediate strike training syllabus and had about twenty-five hours of flight time in the T-2C, not counting time in the simulators. My early morning flight that day with MAJ Blot was a warm-up event to prepare me for my safe-for-solo check flight later that day. I needed the warm-up flight because I had not flown for nearly three weeks due to the squadron’s holiday stand-down and poor weather.

We were the first aircraft to launch from NAS Meridian on 6 January. It was a cold, wintry day, and we climbed into an overcast sky that promised to deliver snow and freezing rain in the afternoon. After we arrived in our working area, a section of sky over east-central Mississippi, we checked in with air traffic control. We then commenced a series of relatively benign practice maneuvers so that I could become reacquainted with the feel of the aircraft after the long holiday break. During the third maneuver, the latch holding the aircraft’s nosecone shut on the right side failed. The nosecone popped open partially, which dramatically altered the aerodynamics of the aircraft and caused it to go out of control.

We quickly regained control after running through our emergency procedures for out-of-control flight. However, while attempting to return to NAS Meridian, the aircraft went out of control again. It entered an inverted spin as it fell into the cloud deck below and ultimately entered a high-speed, or death,

spiral. We broke out of the clouds at 8,000 feet, still in the death spiral. The overcast sky had leached all of the color out of the world, and as the ground spiraled up toward us at three miles per minute, I couldn't help but be reminded of old black and white World War II movies that showed shot-down fighters spiraling into the ground to their destruction. As we passed through 7,000 feet, MAJ Blot initiated ejection in accordance with our emergency procedures, and the next thing I remember, I was drifting down to the ground beneath the canopy of my parachute. After landing, I found MAJ Blot, who had landed about 400 yards away. He was conscious but badly injured. About ten minutes later, the search and rescue (SAR) helicopter from NAS Meridian arrived and flew us directly to the hospital.

Compared to MAJ Blot's injuries, mine seemed insignificant. During the ejection, he broke both of his legs and his neck, and he would require several surgeries and months of physical therapy before he would ever walk, let alone fly, again. The injuries I sustained as a result of the ejection appeared relatively minor at first: a dislocated shoulder; whiplash; a mild concussion; and bruising across my upper torso. While standing next to MAJ Blot's hospital bed, just before doctors drilled holes into his skull to affix the halo that kept his head immobilized for the several months, one of the most important lessons of being a leader was driven home: taking care of your people.

Looking back, I realize now that this lesson was already with me as evidenced by the stubborn, almost comical insistence by both of us to the SAR crew to take the other guy first. MAJ Blot, as the instructor, felt responsible for me, and I knew that his injuries were considerably worse than mine. What really drove home the paramount importance of taking care of your people, however, was something MAJ Blot said to me at the hospital. He told me that he pulled the ejection handle believing beyond a doubt that punching out from our stricken aircraft would probably save my life, but it would most likely kill him. The T-2C, being an older aircraft, was equipped with first-generation ejection seats that did not possess the advanced restraint features of more modern seats. Because of this and the extreme forces resulting from the death spiral, MAJ Blot's body alignment was far from ideal for ejection. While the ejection did not kill him, it did result in the injuries he sustained. MAJ Blot, without hesitation, had risked his life to save mine.

I learned the second lesson of this experience about four months after the crash: the importance of ethics. As described above, my immediate injuries resulting from the ejection seemed relatively minor. I became aware of another, more insidious injury several days after the crash. Wind blast and the violent acceleration of the ejection seat had damaged the retina of left eye, causing a loss of about a quarter of the vision of the eye. In the cold language of medicine, this “visual field defect” meant the end of my career as a pilot if it didn’t heal itself. A battery of vision tests ensued. Not surprisingly, the visual field defect seemed to go away, especially when my lifelong dream of becoming a naval aviator is considered.

After a seven week stint of not flying, I climbed back into a T-2C Buckeye, tallied up more flight time, and remembered how much I loved flying. I soloed, both during the day and night, completed my cross-country flights, and started to work through the formation flying track. During this time, I couldn’t shake the nagging doubt that my left eye wasn’t completely healed, and on my last flight, a formation flight, my doubts were confirmed. While performing a lead change maneuver, the geometry of our two-plane formation worked out just right so that the cockpit of my wingman’s airplane was in the blind spot of the visual field defect in my left eye. I was unable to see the hand signals of my wingman, a key component of safe formation flying. Luckily, we finished the training flight and landed without incident. However, I was confronted with the dilemma of choosing between confessing the vision problem encountered during the flight and probably ending my flying career, or saying nothing and risking a midair collision. On 9 April, my birthday, I told the commanding officer of the squadron what had occurred during my last flight and requested that he ground me. Six months later, the Navy’s Bureau of Medicine made the grounding permanent. Given the choice between the easy wrong of saying nothing or the difficult right of ending my flying career, to this day I know I chose correctly.

The third lesson borne out of the plane crash of 6 January is the need to learn from experience and to be adaptable. After the Navy grounded me, I realized I had to decide which was more important to me: being a naval aviator or being a naval officer. Once I hit upon the opportunities afforded me by the broader purpose of being a naval officer as opposed to an aviator, the rest was relatively easy. Since nothing moves quickly in a bureaucracy, it took the Navy a year to figure out what to do with me. In

April of 2000, the Navy selected me for special operations training and transferred me to the Naval Diving and Salvage Training Center (NDSTC) in Panama City, Florida. There, I was to complete the Navy's Basic Dive Officer Course and then move on to explosive ordnance disposal training. As luck would have it, the diving medical officer at NDSTC, upon screening my medical record, discovered the visual field defect in my left eye and disqualified me from special operations duty in August of 2000. Luckily, with my newfound adaptability, I was able to take this turn of events in stride, and two months later I reported for training at the Navy and Marine Corps Intelligence Training Center in Virginia. I have been an intelligence officer ever since, and I have sought out unique assignments that will make me a well-rounded officer, to include attending the U.S. Army's Command and General Staff College.

The events of 6 January touched nearly every detail of my life and my career, and through the lens of retrospection, I finally realize just how profound the effects really are. I carried MAJ Blot's selfless example with me, and I see now how it molded the way I treat my subordinates. Making tough choices, especially when the outcome is *not* to my benefit, was another invaluable lesson I learned from the crash. Finally, learning to stay flexible and to find the opportunity inherent in chaos, has served me well as a naval intelligence officer. While I never expected to find success in the flames and wreckage of a plane crash, I see now the vital importance of this crucible event in my development as a naval officer.