Chap. 21

Bird: A Tough Way To Get A Callsign

Bird was a Marine Phantom pilot in our squadron. I didn't get to know him very well. He was one of those guys who tended to avoid the doc. Many pilots see the doc as dangerous, since he or she has the power to ground them. That is why, back in those days, the Navy had the policy of putting flight surgeons through basic flight school and having them fly missions with their squadrons. The theory was that having the doc be as close as possible to a full fledged operational member of the squadron, the psychological barriers would be overcome. Pilots would trust the doc, and the doc, having a personal handle on aviation, could do his job better. He would have to essentially wear 2 hats. Or more accurately a hat and a helmet. It depended on the personality of the individual doc how well this worked out. To me the operational side of things was always more important than the fine print in the regulations, and I could see how guys careers were at stake. I was never shy about bending the rules to keep a guy flying, if I thought it was reasonably safe. That buys a lot of good will.

Bird was a quiet, tall lanky guy who did pull ups all the time, and he was so good at doing them that he would routinely win hundreds of dollars in bar bets, beating guys who looked a lot stronger in contests to see who could do more pull ups.

He had an air medal, which was very unusual. Almost all air medals are awarded for meritorious achievement while flying operational missions, mostly in aerial combat, but Bird got his during training, while still a student at flight school. This made Bird feel uncomfortable wearing it around guys who'd been shot at in Viet Nam, and the old vets would wonder why a guy would wear that ribbon in isolation without battle campaign ribbons to go with it. Bird preferred happy hour in a ribbonless flight suit at the O-club.

Milton, Florida is a little town in the panhandle about an hour's drive northeast of Pensacola. Milton features Whiting Field, which is where new Navy and Marine student pilots go for primary training. When I was there in 1981 most students trained in the T-34C, which was gradually replacing the bigger piston driven T-28, essentially a WW2 era airplane. Made by Beechcraft, the T-34C is a dual seat, single engine turboprop which has the same engine as the twin King Air. The student sits in front, the instructor in the back.

That day, Bird (he wasn't "Bird" yet) briefed the flight with the instructor and they walked out to their assigned airplane on the flight line. He had not yet flown solo. He went through his comprehensive preflight checks and he and the instructor, a Marine major, strapped in. Firing up the engine, they taxied out and took off out over the marshy savannah and Spanish moss-covered forests around Milton, and they headed out to the training area.

Mid way through the flight there was a loud crash and it felt like the plane hit a brick wall. The instructor in the back was briefly knocked unconscious. When he came to, he couldn't see anything at first. He thought he might have been blinded by an explosion in the cockpit. Reaching up with his Nomex gloved hands, he rubbed his eyes and found that he could see a little. His visor was cracked in half. There was a 200 knot wind howling in his face, worse than a class 5 hurricane. His face was covered with a bloody mess of wet mangled tissue and bits of bone and plexiglass. He couldn't see much, but realized the airplane was out of control, in a shallow turning dive. He couldn't see the student's head in front of him, just the back of the seat. He tried to communicate with the student, but got no response. The instructor wrestled with the stick but the T-34 was uncontrollable. He guessed the worst. There must have been a midair collision that took out the front of the canopy and cockpit. The student must be dead, and the stuff that covered his face was what remained of his student’s head and brain. Faced with an uncontrollable airplane, he did the only thing he could do. He bailed out and parachuted down into the swamp. He spent the next several hours in his chute, hanging in a tree.

Meanwhile in the crippled T-34C the student who would later be known as Bird woke up. The turkey buzzard that smashed through the front of the canopy had hit him square in the chest and knocked him out cold. He had slumped forward, his inert body leaning on top of the stick. That's why the airplane was uncontrollable from the back seat, and why his helmet couldn't be seen from behind. The tissue matter that partially blinded the instructor was the shattered remains of the turkey buzzard.

Coming to, Bird quickly snapped to the realization that the airplane was skimming the treetops, seconds from crashing. He eased back on the stick and applied throttle. He gained some altitude and gently checked the flight controls. Everything was working. His visor down, the windblast shrieked but he could see well enough. It became his first solo flight. Making a mayday call, he flew the airplane back to Whiting Field and landed it safely on the runway. The instructor pilot was rescued later that day.

This rather famous story has been told and retold many times over drinks at happy hour, in the O-clubs, in the wardrooms and the ready rooms all over the fleet. Bird never once talked about it.