

Lieutenant Harry Balger, United States Navy, would like to have been known as "Badass" in naval aviation circles, but the obvious result of his fondness for snack food led to his "official" NavAir call-sign being "Bulge." And shortly after arriving at Naval Air Station Whidbey Island, Washington, for his first operational flying tour with an A-6 Intruder squadron, Lieutenant (junior grade) Jim "Pinky" Morrell got stuck with "Bulge" Balger as his pilot.

Pinky hated flying with Balger. Absolutely hated it. Balger was a slob who ate constantly and spread fallout everywhere. He'd stuff snacks in the zippered pockets of his flight suit and spend an entire mission chomping through beer nuts, Hershey bars, candy corn, Milk Duds... He'd eat pistachios or sunflower seeds and spit the husks at the instrument panel. He even ate the petrified Navy-issue compressed tree-bark-'n-deer-shit survival bars. He once flew with a pint can of Spanish-style peanuts propped up on the IFF panel, and left the salty skins off the damn things all over the Intruder's cockpit. Pinky *hated* flying with Balger.

His hatred peaked during a bitch of a night hop off San Diego during carrier qualifications when Balger ran out of Cajun-style cheese puffs, which seemed to take his depth perception with them. Bulge suddenly couldn't find the flight deck or his own ass: they were waved-off three times, had to hit the tanker for more gas, then boltered twice before the Air Boss said "Fuck *this*" and bingo'd 'em to North Island. In an "ace" air group like Carrier Air Wing 15, that kind of bad rep stuck to everyone in the cockpit.

Finally, after spending a half-hour after a flight back at Whidbey cleaning the cockpit so the enlisted ground crew wouldn't find it awash in string potatoes and soggy bits of Zag Nut Bars, Pinky decided he'd had enough. He gathered what courage a Jay Gee is allowed to have, marched through the squadron operations officer's door, slammed it shut, and demanded to fly with another pilot.

Grinning, the Opso said, "We were all wondering how long it'd take you to get here, Pinky. I had five bucks on Friday, but I think the Skipper's just won the pool. I'd like to help you out, but you're the last guy on Whidbey to refuse to fly with Bulge. I'm afraid you're stuck, pal. Sorry."

"That's just great, sir. Thanks a lot."

For their first launch off the carrier after flying aboard at the start of Pinky's first-ever deployment overseas, they were taxied up to Cat 2, the catapult on the left-hand side of the bow. As Pinky and Bulge completed their prior-to-launch checklist, an F-14 Tomcat taxied over the jet blast deflector on Cat 1, to their immediate right, and the Cat 1 crew raised the blast deflector behind it and began prepping the big fighter for launch.

The Cat 2 gang got Pinky's Intruder connected to the catapult shuttle, installed the hold-back bar, pulled all the "Remove Before Flight" pins, made the final safety checks, gave them the "tensioned" signal, and the Launch Officer, or "Shooter," gave them the "V" sign to run the engines up to max power for the cat shot. Bulge--clamping a leftover barbecued chicken wing in his teeth--used his right hand to "clean out the cockpit" with the stick, while dropping his left hand down to the throttle quadrant to shove the throttles up.

Instantly, Pinky saw the "FIRE" lights come on for #1 engine. Bulge didn't notice, being too involved with trying to grip the wing with his lips and get a bite out of it with his front teeth.

Bulge raised his right hand to salute the Shooter, signaling their readiness to launch. Pinky screamed "HEY!" at him, smacked him hard on the side of the helmet with his left forearm, and pointed to the bright-red flashing "FIRE" lights on the panel in front of Bulge's face.

He spit the wing towards the artificial horizon, said, "Oh, *SHIT*," keyed the radio, and yelled, "SUSPEND CAT ONE!"

The Shooter dropped to his right knee, touched the deck with his outstretched right hand, pointed forward, and Cat 2 fired Pinky, Bulge and their flaming engine off into the bright Pacific sky, while the crew on Cat 1 shut down and ran for a tug to drag two bewildered fighter guys in a perfectly good Tomcat off to get "fixed."

After making the emergency call, Pinky spent most of their left-hand circuit back to the arresting wires hitting Bulge over the helmet with his kneeboard.

And after the "*WHAT-in-THE-fuck*" meeting with CAG and their squadron CO, Pinky was assigned to another pilot.