“**God Bless Corporal Schwartz**”

**This incident** happened to me at NAS NY while serving as a Plane Captain!

**Over** the years, I’ve been asked many times, what is a Marine Plane Captain? That question has come from friends, veterans and other Marines. Let me tell you about their responsibilities before I get to this incident.

**Background:** in the sixties, an aviation Marine first trained in one of the eight or so aircraft support MOSs (Military Occupational Specialty) like Jet Mechanic, Avionics, Radio, Hydraulics, Seat Shop, etc. Marines who became Plane Captains received additional training to quality for this specialty. The training was usually OJT (on the job). In short, Plane Captains trained other Plane Captains. Training, mentoring, and then serving together was unique and rewarding experience leading to close comradery.

A Plane Captain’s primary responsibility is to ensure the aircraft is ready to fly. All systems and surfaces that can be inspected without power are checked out including the cockpit, tires, brakes, hydraulics, oil and required fuel. A Plane Carian’s approval is required before that aircraft is reported to Operations for Pilot assignment. Plane Captains with a towing license moved the aircraft when required to the defueling station, hanger or wherever needed. The Plane Caption assisted the pilot in strapping into the cockpit (the A4 was also called the strap on bomber), starting the engine, and checking that all control surfaces included the tail hook were properly working. Then, they safely lead the aircraft from it’s the tie-down slot and out to the taxi way.

When a flight of multiple jets were started, you must be aware of your surroundings at all times. The noise on the jet line gets so loud that your sense of hearing was useless and communication was done my hand signals. The percentage accidents was **extremely lo**w as safety is the highest priority, but when one happens to you, that changes from rare to 100% thing – very personal.

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**During** the last week of Basic Aviation Training at NAS Jacksonville, I was seeing a Gunny Sgt. for my assignment for advanced aviation training. All started well, I had qualified for one of the most intense electronics schools at El Toro. When the Gunny found out I was color blind and he went ape shit. I was sent to the barracks to pack my sea bag as I was being sent back to Floyd Bennet the next day (since he believed that they caused the problem).

Upon reporting to Floyd Bennet, I was sent to see the Master Guns. He told me that my timing was perfect. There was a need for a Plane Captain from the Seat Shop on the jet line and I would OJT for both. The Marines would include as many different MOSs as possible as Plane Captains, so that minor problems could be fixed on the line. This variation of MOSs helped avoid calling for assistance from the support shops or towing the aircraft back to the hanger for minor repairs.

**Then**, I reported to Staff Sgt Barns in the line shack. At NAS NY, the Marine jet line was close to a half mile from our hanger with the Navy’s hanger in the middle. Staff Sgt. said that I was a “first.” The best way to train me would be to work my ass off for the next two months. He ordered Corporal Schwartz to be my mentor.

Within a day, I found out that Cpl. Schwartz was the bad ass of MARTD (Marine Aviation Reserve Training Detachment). He was about 6’2” and 220 lbs. of pure no-nonsense Marine. Needless to say that I did everything possible not to piss him off. He turned out to be a great mentor and mate. He even had his own “set of rules” for working safely on the flight line. Rule Number One was: “if you feel heat, dive on your face.” He other rules and every day, he would ask me for two rules before going out onto the flight line. The “Number One” question was always “the first rule” asked.

**Upon** completing active duty, I was assigned to VMA-131 as a Plane Captain and not to the Seat Shop. On Saturday ,19 March 1966, I was assigned to the last A4 Skyhawk in a flight of eight on the first hop of the afternoon. I was leading my A4 out the tie-down slot and out to the taxi way. Suddenly, God told me to follow “rule number one.” I didn’t think I could think that fast on my own. I tried to plant my face on the deck as the tail pipe of a Skyhawk in line ahead of me went over my head. My head and neck were bruned and I was blown a distance away ripping up my hands. Cpl. John Rotante took me to the base infirmary where the second degree plus burns were treated and my hands stitched. I was sent home for the rest of the weekend.

On Monday, I went to work at IBM with very little hair, and white ointment on my neck and head. Also, I had bandages on my hands. The first person I met before work was a pretty Irish strawberry blond girl with a personality to match! She asked me what happened and I tried to explain. About a year and a half later, we began to date and were married five months later (we celebrated our 50th anniversary this past December. What girl could resist a wounded Marine?

**I reported** to the line the next month. The first thing Gunny Pizza said to me was that I could take the weekend off. A short time later, I looked at the assignment board and saw that Lt. Col. Hendershot was scheduled. I was his Plane Captain and I told Gunny that I was going preflight that that A4. Gunny started to say “I told you …” and I cut him off saying “If I don’t preflight and launch Hendershot’s plane, I might never go out on the flight line again.” After the launch, I returned to the line shack and looked around and said “we seem to be missing a few guys.” I was told “we reorganized the line last Sunday”. I replied with a laugh thinking that if I wanted to confirm who did it, I could. But, it was good to get rid of the screw ups before someone does get killed.

I would like to close with a few thoughts:

* Sometimes, I don’t want to remember that day and other days, I can’t help but to remember every detail.
* I am convinced that Cpl. Schwartz saw someone get fried or at least was on the line when that happened.
* When he trained me, it was not about following a preflight check list for the aircraft, but more about Plane Captain responsibility. Taking ownership (the plane doesn’t fly until I say so), safety of others on the flight line including our pilots, and aways be aware that Murphy might visit. Make sure the aircraft is good to fly (go beyond the check list by checking out the entire airplane to my satisfaction).

**God bless him.**

**PS:** That first weekend back at NAS NY, I also went to the MARTD barracks to see Corporal Schwartz, but he had re-enlisted and was on his he way to end up in Vietnam.

Recently, a Marine who was at MARTD while I was on active duty there contacted me. This was a result of his viewing this website. He was trying to locate a VMA-131 MSgt. who had volunteered to go active, and then served with him in Vietnam. I was able to help him. Additionally, he called me and we spoke at length of the NAS NY days. He told me about seven or eight other MARDT Marines, that I knew and served with. He told me great news, every one of them, safely returned home from Vietnam.