

Celestial Fire [Excerpt ~ Chapter 12]

Subic Bay, Philippines, was crowded with anchored ships from the Sixth Fleet. It was either a large-class cruiser or destroyer that filled the cockpit window as our fully loaded, four-engine transport inched its way through 150 feet of altitude—having just completed its takeoff run from NAS Cubi Point, Philippines. Then, without warning, life, as we *previously* knew it, ceased to exist.

We now enter a very interesting world of delight and conjecture. An imposing and paradoxical undertaking, trying to define the miraculous is to reach the pinnacle of subjectivity. Examining this subject may be both titillating and insightful; it's not for the timid, however. I supplement the details of my personal adventure with Spiritual perspectives perhaps quite different from anything you've read or heard about before. Consider setting all preconceptions aside. *Do not attempt to adjust the vertical. Do not attempt to adjust the horizontal.* Sit back and observe, as we are transported into the Outer Limits® for an up-close-and-personal exposé on the conditions for, and the purposes of...**MIRACLES.**

Miracle Candidate #1: “How Did You Know?”

At the Cubi Point Naval Base, in the 1960s, the airstrip was tucked alongside steep mountains. Departing from the normal-duty runway, mountains were located ahead and on the right—requiring reciprocating-engine (prop) aircraft to begin an immediate left-hand turn after liftoff. Flight crews were then instructed to continue their climb-out over a normally unencumbered Subic Bay.

During a slowly climbing, 15- to 20-degree turn, we followed the assigned departure route. At maximum allowable weight, this was a hot, humid, high-noon, water-injected takeoff. Although pleased to be airborne and on our way to our layover destination in Atsugi, Japan, this was not to be a routine flight.

Crew of Ten. Two pilots in this crew were left-seat qualified. As fortune had it, this was my turn in the saddle. We normally flew with double crews to relieve one another on long flights. As continuous 15- 24-hour flight duty sessions were the norm, rest was essential. We carried a complement of three pilots, two aircraft mechanics, two cargo handlers, and two radio-instrumentation personnel. During takeoffs and landings the designated flight engineer sat on a fold-down bench between the left-seat and right-seat pilots—practically rubbing shoulders with us. The engineer's in-flight job, among other monitoring duties, was to keep a keen eye on the engine instruments, trim the propellers—congruently matching their

revolutions per minute (rpm's)—and upon reaching cruising altitude, lean the fuel mixture. Most importantly, the flight mechanic/engineer ensured that pilots did not over-boost (red line) the engines on takeoff, climb out, or when reversing the props during landing.

This particular Cubi Point departure proved tricky because many ships from the Sixth Fleet—out of Italy—happened to be anchored in Subic Bay. Recalling this incident, two or three cruisers/destroyers and assorted tenders harbored in that Bay. It was, of course, imperative that aircraft avoid these massive ships—complete with conning (radar) towers and tall whip antennas—during climb out. These and related precautions were discussed in the preflight briefing with Cubi flight operations. Already airborne, we were well past any anticipatory planning.

On hot, maximum-weight takeoffs, we always used water injection to maximize horsepower. This reduced takeoff-roll distance and helped cool the engine cylinders. Water injection was supplied through special lines with boosted pressure. The fluid originated from a separate storage tank on the fuselage, near the wing-joint, and four electric toggle switches located above the flight engineer's head controlled the injection. Naturally, this takeoff required all the power we could generate. Using water injection—listed on the takeoff checklist—was standard procedure during summer months in the South Pacific Rim.

Our Pratt & Whitney® powerplants performed perfectly during the preflight check, takeoff roll, and initial climb-out. In the cockpit, during that 20-degree, left-hand turn, at one-hundred-fifty feet, I had already given the verbal *gear-up* order, combined with a *thumbs-up* signal.

Suddenly, without warning, all four engines...quit. They reacted as if someone had just pulled back the throttle levers, or switched off the electric current-producing magnetos. [*Crudely stated, a magneto serves a function similar to the ignition switch in your car.*] This was *not* one of the practiced **one**-engine-out, **two**-engines-out, or **three**-engines-out scenarios. Void of procedures or checklists, I'm sure we all had the same thought: the *fat lady* just finished singing.

"How could all four engines fail simultaneously," you ask? Excellent question, but we had sufficient time to consider only that we were in *deep, deep, doo-doo*. Training had not—could not provide any rabbits for this brand of hat. After this little adventure—assuming we survived, we would have an additional offering for the Training Command's suggestion box. In the meantime, CJ, my mental critic, kicked in with: "I *told* you to take the jet pipeline, Dummy! Now look at the fine mess [no ejection seats] you've gotten us into!"

Freeze Frame. [*For a more detailed examination of this event, let us slow the passage of linear time. The most critical*

phase of what I describe happened in the span of 10 to 15 seconds.] I quickly scanned the instruments to confirm my worst fears and verified what my other senses already told me—yes...rapidly losing power on all four engines. I looked quickly at Lou, our flight mechanic, white with stunned disbelief, as were we all. Then, I did something that horrified both the engineer and the copilot even more—if that was possible.

Reconstructed from witnessed accounts: without thinking or conscious action, my right hand moved to the overhead instrument cluster. Both the engineer and copilot (the senior officer and A/C for this trip) gasped “NO!” as I...

to be continued in: ***Celestial Fire ~ A Naval Aviator's Spiritual Odyssey.***)

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