An EP-3B Tale. By Marion "Casey" Bardsley. AMEC USN (Ret)

It was a warm, clear day on 1 May 1975 in the Philippines. We preflighted EP-3B PR-32 for a mission to Vietnam. The trip over was normal but what we found when we got there wasn't. it was the last day of Saigon and everyone that could was evacuating the country. Looking down we saw small airplanes landing on a carrier and then being pushed over the side. Helos were landing on small ships or in the water. It was a very hectic scene!

We had just finished our mission and we're starting back to the P. I. when all of a sudden, number one engine fire warning came on! We had been having erroneous warnings on this engine but the electricians could not find the problem. We shut the engine down but did not discharge the fire suppressant, as we could not see actual signs of a fire. A Navy fighter providing air cover flew over and looked up the tail pipe and checked the nacelle. We continued on and soon the fire warning light went out. We filled out an inflight incident report with, "Uneventful three engine landing made at Cubi Point." We should never have said, "Uneventful!"

Upon touchdown every thing was normal but when pulling 2, 3, and 4 into reverse the aircraft made a hard swerve to the right! We kept number two in reverse and set max power on 3 and 4. The aircraft straightened on the runway and then we milked 3 and 4 into reverse, keeping the aircraft straight on he runway. After we stopped, we first thought we had blown a main mount but the radioman looked out the forward observation window and said the tires were up and looked okay. So, we taxied back to the VQ-1 parking spot. After shutting down the engines I went to see what had happened to the starboard main gear. When I got to the bottom of the aircraft ladder the right hand gear started burning! I ran back up on the airplane and started number three engine; I released the brake and called ground control for a fire truck. Monitoring the start on the engine, I set 1000 shaft horsepower and started looking for the fire truck. I noticed it slowly driving up and down in the parking area. When it finally got to us I shut down number three and went back to the starboard landing gear. The fire was out so the fire truck just stood by. The fusible plugs in the tires worked as both tires were flat. After things cooled down we jacked the main mount up and found the outboard brake assembly had come apart and seized on the axel, causing severe scaring. As the axel was an integral part of the barrel assembly, the strut had had to be changed. A strut was found to be available in Okinawa, which was shipped to us.

Meanwhile, there was a large Quonset where airplanes were painted and it was in this building where we put PR-32 so we could jack the aircraft. The plane was jacked up and while it was on jacks, a Navy A-4 jet had a flameout on approach and the pilot ejected. The plane veered right and impacted in a Marine maintenance area causing a huge explosion and then a second as the fuel tanks exploded. These then caused a liquid oxygen tank to explode! On the first and second explosion, the aircraft jumped off the jacks about a foot and then came back down on the jack points. No one knows about the third explosion as the area was being hastily evacuated. After everything settled down, we determined the aircraft was okay. We found out later two marines were killed in the explosions. It could have been much worse but most of the marines were up at the runway to watch one of the first groups of F-14 Tomcats takeoff.

As I remember, I was in the line shack when the first explosion went off. I remember thinking it was incoming until I realized I was in the Philippines! About the time of the second explosion I headed for the door and as I opened it the LOX cart went off and fire from this looked like it was at the hangar! Luckily, it was on the far side and the fire quickly went out. Once the crash crew arrived, they put out the rest of the fires. After that, things settled down and we finished changing the strut and everything checked out.

And now for the rest of the story!

We were on a mission out of Atsugi into the Sea of Japan. There was a typhoon headed for the Tokyo/Yokohama so at the end of the mission we were told to divert to Misawa, on the northern end of Honshu. The weather there wasn't much better with wind and rain. After a rough approach, on final the engine fire warning light on number one came on! We landed and shut down the engine. The next morning the fire warning light was still on and finally the electricians were able to find and fix a bad coupling in the fire detection loop.