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On 19 July 1969, a Friday, a jet crashed on take off from Naval Air Station-Oceana in Virginia Beach. I heard about it as I was leaving the Bachelor Officers Quarters for the hangar. It was an F-8 Crusader, and I was thankful, once again, that I was flying a fighter with two engines – the far more forgiving F-4 Phantom. When I got to the squadron ready room more details emerged: the pilot didn't make it; he waited too long to eject. Our four-plane air-to-ground training flight was cancelled, and we were instead sent to the simulators for emergency procedures practice.

Before dinner that night we watched the evening news: the local anchor led with the story. He said that eyewitness motorists on both Oceana Boulevard and Potters Road agreed that the jet appeared to lose power and turned left, losing altitude. One witness, a plane-watcher parked at the junction of the two roads, said that the pilot ejected at treetop level, in all likelihood so that the plane would crash in open space, which it did. The Navy, the anchorman said, identified the young pilot as Lieutenant Junior Grade David Todd Wadsworth of Huntington, New York. The coverage switched back to more eyewitnesses, but I didn't hear a thing. I could hardly breathe.

Todd Wadsworth was my best friend in eighth and ninth grade. Actually, for much of the eighth, he was my only friend. My family had just moved to Long Island from Brazil, where I had spent my formative years, and I had trouble fitting in. After ninth grade Todd went off to a boarding school in Massachusetts and though I found my social footing in high school, I never developed any friendships as meaningful as his. Anyway,

we gradually lost touch. I had no idea he was a naval aviator, let alone at NAS-Oceana.

A few days later, probably Monday, he was to have a memorial service at the base chapel. I went, but I could only get there late and still in a sweat-stained flight suit, I stayed outside. I took shelter from the late morning sun in a grove of mature oak trees, where a young civilian and a sailor in whites were having a smoke. I asked the civilian how he knew Todd and he said, "My girlfriend and I were friends with Paulette at Old Dominion. We went to their wedding. Hard to believe – not even a month ago."

The sailor read my look. "He was my division officer, sir. Kept me from getting busted. More than once." He looked at the chapel. "Place was hot, packed."

My turn and I said: "Small world story – we were boyhood buddies. Close."

The sailor looked at my name patch. "What squadron are you in, Lieutenant?"

"I'm a replacement pilot. After carrier qualifications, I'll join Fighter Squadron 33."

"Replacement pilot," the civilian said. "That's ironic."

People spilled out of the chapel then, and the young sailor and I sought an open vantage to the southeast. The civilian had left us, and I looked for him thinking in doing so I might spot Paulette and maybe Todd's family. His mom had been a model, her likeness used for the cameo portrait of Betty Crocker, the baking brand icon. I scanned the dark, broad-rimmed hats among the white dress uniforms.

The crowd quieted and we saw the three Crusaders on the horizon and as they approached, the awkward gap in the missing-man formation. As they roared overhead, I thought, suddenly, of my fiancé in Miami and I felt crushed by the weight of it all: the emotion of the moment, the unrelenting stress of wartime pilot training and the anxiety of flying, soon again, aboard ship. I couldn't stop the tears. When I finally knuckled the last

of them away, the enlisted man was still at my side, staring – as I was – at the empty horizon. Without looking at me, he said: “You remind me of him, sir.”

I could only think to say, “I sure hope so.”