

# Sixty-Four Days

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Published: 2015

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*“Shit, the flight deck is the most dangerous place on the planet. There’s forty jets up there and some are being fueled with their engines running while having armed lethal weapons attached to their wings. One or two at a time they’re being launched off the front of the ship by steam-powered catapults that accelerate from zero to a hundred-fifty miles-per-hour in three seconds, or landing on the back end in what’s basically a controlled crash.”*

—Anonymous Deckhand

When Senior Chief Brendan O’Reilly stepped onto the flight deck, his red brows clamped down over eyes that were suddenly hard like black ball bearings.

He stared at a yellow ordnance cart chained to the black nonskid deck. The sight of four quarter-ton bombs strapped on the cart sent a nervous shiver jangling down the bones in his lower back.

As O'Reilly walked across the flight deck, his fresh starched khakis chafed against the old burn scar on his right thigh. A quick glance across the brilliant blue sky told him it was going to be another cloudless eighty-five-degree day with light breezes out of the north. In his headset an ordnanceman down in the magazine gave an inventory of the weapons sent up that morning. “—forty-eight quarter-ton bombs, four half-ton bombs, six Sidewinder missiles, nine Sea Sparrow missiles, sixteen Phoenix missiles, sixteen Shrike missiles, sixteen Cluster bombs—”

Under the wings of every jet on the flight deck, a deck packed with over forty aircraft, sat a cart full of bombs, rockets and missiles.

At the port side, O'Reilly climbed down into the catwalk and stepped through a watertight door into the ship. Young men in canvas pants, steel toe boots and blue long-sleeve jerseys lounged on bails of rags, sat in metal folding chairs or stood around smoking in the florescent-lit compartment. They were nineteen and twenty year old boys, really. They had smooth jaws, mussed hair, a scatter of pimples, razor nicks. They spoke in accents from across the country—Ohio drawl, Texas twang, SoCal surfer, Chicago street.

“Morning, Senior Chief,” several said in broken harmony.

O'Reilly turned off the hip-hop bouncing out of a CD player and looked around at his crew. Any other day he would have growled, “Time for work, you scalawags!” but this morning he suddenly wanted to be careful about everything. He said, “You men will keep your heads out of your asses today because we’ve got ordnance on deck.” They half listened to their Senior Chief’s warning.

After the compartment emptied Airman Conway remained, snoozing on a bail of rags.

O'Reilly hesitated before shaking the red-haired, freckle-faced kid. A smile lit O'Reilly’s eyes as he thought back over twenty-nine years to his own days as a deckhand. Must of looked the same, he thought, as he shook Conway’s shoulder gently. “Conway, you tyrant, wake up.”

Conway’s red eyebrows pinched together, furrowing his freckled forehead. This ain’t like the gnarly old man, Conway thought, as he put on the accent of his Brooklyn Irish uncles, an accent he used to jazz the old chief. Conway’s eyes popped open and he said, “Top o’ the morning, Chief O'Reilly.”

The chief’s smile vanished. He barked, “Conway, I’ve bitched you out a thousand times for sleeping in my shop. Now get up on deck and keep your head out of your ass. Today’s a big bombing day.”

“Bombing day!” Conway punched up the brogue, defying the chief’s hard-ass pose. “Let me get a look at these fireworks.” He leaped to his feet and bolted from the compartment.

“Fireworks,” O'Reilly muttered. His thumb traced the edge of the old burn scar on his right thigh. “Fucking kids these days.”

Ordnance handlers strong-backed bombs under jet wings and secured them to weapon stations by turning oversized ratchets. They armed rockets and missiles. They wired detonators into the noses of quarter-ton bombs.

Pilots in flight suits and crash helmets emerged from doors in the superstructure and walked to their aircraft to conduct preflight checks.

The ship shuddered as it turned and accelerated directly into the wind. Word came to start the go aircraft. A harsh whistling whine cut at men's ears as jet engines sucked in and compressed massive gulps of air. Engines lit off and blasted hot turbulence across the deck. Straightaway two F-14 Tomcat fighter jets and an A-7 Corsair bomber taxied to the steam powered catapults and were launched roaring into the sky. One after another, pilots nudged their throttles forward and fired their engines to get their aircraft into position on the catapult. They sent gales of exhaust fumes across the deck. When caught in the blast, crewmen squatted down and grabbed a padeye with their fingers and held on. Others braced themselves by bending a knee and gripping the oily deck with the soles of their black boots. Salty sea air, thick with the smell of hot metal and burnt fuel, filled every man's lungs.

After the last jet screeched into the sky, O'Reilly found a dark, air-conditioned passageway inside the superstructure. He lit a filterless Camel and pushed the sweat-slick headset back off one ear. He inhaled hard to get the smoke down deep, to calm his nerves, nerves that jangled easily these days, especially when working around explosives.

In the dark privacy, he allowed a serene smile to spread his sunburned lips. He thought about returning to San Francisco in sixty-four days. His loving wife Diane would be waiting on the pier to greet him as she had in Norfolk, Alexandria, Tokyo, Singapore and countless other port cities around the world over the past twenty-nine years. Diane would have a taxi waiting, dinner reservations and a hotel room. His thoughts lingered on his lovely wife. He appreciated everything about her, from the way she ran their home, paid all the bills, moved from base to base, and kept her fine body in shape. Always on the treadmill. Powerful feelings of lust stirred throughout his body as an image of her pretty face came into focus in his mind. He savored the sight of her hairdo, stacked high and held just so with pins secretly placed inside. Her eyelids and cheeks painted subtle warm shades. He couldn't wait until they were safe in each other's arms. The ship's home port of Alameda, California was another sixty-four days away.

This is the last time we'll meet on a Navy pier, O'Reilly mused. All he wanted was to see Diane and start collecting his Navy pension in sixty-four days.

He had glossy motorhome brochures, like a young sailor's girlie magazines, stuffed under his mattress. Every night, before going to sleep, he ogled the pictures of brand new Winnebagos, Tiagos and Pace Arrows. He looked at the truck-sized radial tires and imagined them gripping the road as he and Diane toured the highways and back roads of North America. He read the specs and thought about the optional features. Diane insisted on a CD player with hi-fi speakers. They'd have a queen-size bed in back and swiveling captains' chairs up front. He inhaled smoke and thought about which of the national parks they'd visit first in their brand new land yacht. "The Grand Canyon," he whispered, "or maybe Yellowstone." Trying to decide, there in the darkness, thousands of miles

from land, he contemplated the Four-Corner's area. His mind conjured images of desert canyons stretching for miles, cactus and burnt-orange mesas rising high into electric-blue skies. That dry climate enticed him, especially after so many years at sea. His thoughts shifted to scenic Wyoming, great stands of evergreen trees covering mountainsides and country roads winding their way upward to glacier-covered summits. His heart ached to sit with Diane in a cozy booth in a roadside diner, relaxing as they drank strong coffee and studied maps and guidebooks together.

Deserts or mountains, he contemplated and felt a little miffed at the difficulty the decision posed. Then a smile spread across his lips because he realized that deserts or mountains was the hardest choice he was going to make after retiring from the Navy in sixty-four days.

"Senior Chief O'Reilly, got your ears on?" The Airboss's metallic voice interrupted his retirement fantasy. In one jump, he extinguished the Camel between his fingertips, slipped the butt into his pocket and stepped outside into brilliant sunshine.

"O'Reilly here, go ahead."

"Be advised, airborne A-7 with ordnance issues."

"Roger that." O'Reilly went directly to battle station number one in the starboard catwalk to find Petty Officer Brewer—a human tree-trunk on the flight deck firefighting crew.

A couple years back O'Reilly noticed Brewer always stayed calm during precarious flight deck operations, so O'Reilly got orders for Brewer to attend every disaster preparedness school the Navy and Marine Corps offered. The closer O'Reilly got to retirement the closer he got to Brewer in a pending disaster. Brewer wore a tight trimmed black beard on his square jaw and had straight white teeth behind thin red lips. Living sailor-style between the tropics tanned Brewer to a leathery brown.

O'Reilly hustled around the superstructure, weaved behind several tow tractors and found Brewer right where he knew he'd be.

"What's going on, Senior Chief?" Brewer asked.

"Corsair's got trouble, we're standing by."

Airman Conway walked over and asked, "Chief, something wrong with one of them birds just took off?"

"First of all, Conway, it's Senior Chief, and to answer your question, yes an A-7 is having trouble," O'Reilly said. "Tell your shipmates not to run off."

"Ain't those A-7s loaded with quarter-ton block-busters?" Conway asked, a reckless smile spreading his lips.

O'Reilly wanted to slap the freckles off Conway's face.

Beneath a cloud of cigar and cigarette smoke, a Plexiglas model of the flight deck, about the size of a pool table, filled the center of the compartment.

"This A-7 took off with sixteen quarter-ton bombs, but only twelve came off when the pilot pushed the button to drop them," Warrant Officer Maguire, a man with red cheeks and a receding hairline, told O'Reilly and ten other men standing around the table. "That means there's a high probability that we will have to land this jet with four quarter-ton bombs stuck on wing station number three. A few

minutes ago the captain ordered us to land everything except the A-7 and then man up crash and salvage.”

O'Reilly drew a deep drag off his cigarette and secretly hoped they'd leave him on the periphery of the action. I've got sixty-four days, for Christ's sake, he thought to himself. Don't put me in the middle of this clusterfuck.

“Chief Walker will have thirty men at battle station six as a casualty handling contingency,” Maguire continued. “Chief Mann will have an auxiliary crash and salvage team on hose stations and fire bottles. Senior Chief O'Reilly will lead the first firefighting team, which makes him the crash scene leader.”

Every face, now silent and serious, stared at O'Reilly.

He inhaled slowly and mustered his thoughts. He spoke purposefully, his voice not quavering. “We have to evacuate compartments under the landing area. If any of these bombs come off, it could be a hellish scene down there. We'll also need firefighters standing by.” O'Reilly paused. “Two-thousand pounds of ordnance hanging on one wing will cause this aircraft's tires to blow and her magnesium rims will scrape the deck hard. If those rims ignite it'll be a complex situation, because burning magnesium produces its own oxygen, it sustains a high temperature and glows so brightly it'll burn your eyes if you look at it. Once it starts burning, we won't be able to extinguish it. Anyone near it without proper training and protective gear could sustain serious burns and other injuries. One option will be for Bessy to hoist the aircraft while we cut off her landing gear and then jettison the burning magnesium rims over the side. We have a team trained to do that,” O'Reilly looked at Warrant Officer Maguire, “and I'll need that team standing by.”

“Gotcha covered, Senior Chief,” Maguire replied.

O'Reilly glanced around and saw competent men with grave expressions staring at him. He suppressed a flicker of pride at knowing his job so well.

Over twenty-five years earlier on a smaller flight deck, nineteen-year-old Brendan O'Reilly walked along, carrying a toolbox. Suddenly a thread of blue smoke shot across the deck, marking a missile's trajectory. Stray voltage in an A-4 Sky Warrior's armament system had found its way to the jet's trigger and launched a Shrike missile. Brendan knew it was a terrible mistake as he dropped his toolbox. Before it hit the deck, a tremendous explosion and orange flames lifted a cloud of black smoke into the sky. The alarm, “Fire on the flight deck!” spread quickly through the maze of steel passages below. That Shrike missile had scored a direct hit on the first in a row of aircraft that were fully loaded with weapons and fuel. The explosion killed several men sleeping in their bunks in the compartment under the flight deck and it knocked over file cabinets five decks below. Brendan jumped on a hose team and ran straight at the fire. A second explosion knocked the hose team to the deck and showered them with flaming jet fuel. The hose team's nozzle man looked like a scarecrow soaked in gas and set ablaze. The high-pressure hose slithered like a snake as salt water gushed from the ripped end where the brass nozzle had been. A splash of flaming jet fuel soaked the right leg of Brendan's pants. Brendan rolled on the deck in a panic, slapping the burning fabric with both hands until a mechanic pulled off his turtleneck jersey and smothered the fire on Brendan's leg. Brendan's pants fused to the skin on his

right thigh. Blisters rose on the palms and fingers of both hands. The bombs on a third jet erupted, consuming the aircraft in a spectacular blast. The jet's flaming tail section collapsed into a catwalk fueling station, melting the black rubber hoses. Torrents of flaming jet fuel flowed through a ventilation duct and poured fire into compartments below. Brendan stood paralyzed, unable to run away and unable to fight the fire. Although his hands stung with a cruel pain, he still clutched a fire extinguisher. He watched a flight deck chief run in to rescue a pilot burning in a locked cockpit. Without warning a Cluster bomb detonated, disintegrating the chief as ten-thousand burning sulfur bits surrounded him. Black soot burned in Brendan's eyes and mouth, making it impossible to see or breathe. Deafened by the explosions, Brendan could not hear the men shouting orders frantically around him. Flame-engulfed jets collapsed into holes torn in the deck by their own exploding bombs. When the fire spread to a flare locker in the catwalk, hundreds of flares whistled in white arcs across the blue sky. It took fifteen hours to get the blaze under control. Without the aid of a destroyer that pulled alongside and doused the fire from outboard, the carrier might have sunk. In the aftermath, they counted forty-seven dead deckhands. Six pilots incinerated in their cockpits. The bodies of thirteen sailors, asleep in their bunks in compartments below, were later excavated from the wreckage. Rumors about a guy who was blown up while taking a crap in a head under the flight deck went around after a crash and salvage crew used a welder's torch to dislodge a pair of blackened hipbones from a stainless steel toilet bowl.

In a compartment crammed with computers and communication gear, high above the flight deck, up in the superstructure, all information coming from airborne aircraft is routed to flight controllers and aircraft handlers aboard the ship. One screen showed the location of every aircraft in the sky, and it hung to the side of a narrow console beneath big tinted windows. The windows angled outward, looking down on the flight deck, like a board game, seventy feet below.

Captain Stone stood tall and broad shouldered with an enormous head, gray eyes, great jowls and a shining brow. He wore khaki pants and a gold turtleneck jersey. He spoke directly into O'Reilly's face. "As my crash scene leader I'm relying on you to think fast and act decisively because my reputation, valuable equipment and men's lives are all at risk when this jet hits the deck and you start making decisions down there." Captain Stone pointed out the window toward the flight deck below. "In a few seconds you will take a look at this aircraft and then you will tell me your plan. Is that clear O'Reilly?"

The fine red hairs on the back of O'Reilly's neck sprang to attention. The pores in his skin, from his freckled forehead to the tips of his clammy white toes, opened in unison and secreted a microscopic drop of salty perspiration.

No pressure, he told himself.

The Airboss sat erect in a black leather bucket seat. Ray-Bans hid his eyes. Headphones clamped over his black crewcut. Both hands worked a panel of dials and switches. In a cyborg voice, he continually spoke a cipher of code words and acronyms into a tiny microphone that wrapped around in front of his lips.

A CAD image of the A-7 Corsair, with a cutaway view of the wings, illuminated one of the computer monitors mounted above the windows. It was easy to see a fuel bladder filling every bit of space between the alloy ribs in the A-7's wing.

The Airboss swiveled around, removed his headset. "Howdy, Senior Chief O'Reilly. Skipper, thirty seconds on the A-7. Cameras are rolling."

Loud grumbling preceded the jet's approach, and it took about a second for it to bolt past the window.

"I'll roll the tape in slow-mo for you now," the Airboss said, fingering a button. "We're looking for a red streamer on a pin that should have been removed before flight."

On a TV screen above the windows they saw the A-7's nose cone slowly enter from the left, and then the cockpit's canopy and the pilot's jaw jutting from his crash helmet. The cockpit slid forward out of the frame.

"Zoom in!" Captain Stone barked. The wing's leading edge and the rack of quarter-ton bombs slid slowly into the frame. "Freeze it now!" Stone ordered. They saw a detonator, rigged with a long strand of gold wire screwed into the nose of each bomb. The bombs were mounted on a gray rack, and the rack was secured to a station under the wing. There were no streamers or pins in sight.

"Order that pilot to shake those weapons."

The Airboss relayed Captain Stone's order.

For a tense minute, they waited in silence.

The pilot radioed, "Bombs are hanging on."

Captain Stone turned his laser-sharp eyes on O'Reilly and said, "We are over two-thousand miles from land, so I'm sure you are aware that this ship is the only place for this aircraft to land. Therefore, right now I want you to tell me your plan for a safe recovery of this aircraft on my flight deck."

O'Reilly wanted to say, "Captain, let's order the pilot to eject from the aircraft and then we'll send a helicopter to pluck him from the water. That way I can go back to San Francisco, meet up with my beautiful wife, and retire in one piece."

Instead, O'Reilly said exactly what the captain wanted to hear. "Sir, I'll have fire fighters, crash crews and a medical team standing by. We'll be able to—"

Captain Stone listened but he knew he couldn't do anything to control the situation short of going down on the flight deck and taking charge of the crash scene himself. As O'Reilly spoke, Stone imagined what it would be like trying to direct deckhands who were faced with a jet on fire, on a flight deck crowded with aircraft and explosives. No, he'd rely on O'Reilly, this crash scene leader, if for nothing else than to have someone to blame if things went wrong. Stone knew that a crash, even an accident with injuries on his flight deck, would mean red ink on his next performance evaluation, and that might jeopardize his chances of making admiral.

When O'Reilly stopped speaking, Captain Stone said, "You have an outstanding strategy."

"Outstanding my ass," O'Reilly whispered as he climbed back down ladders to the flight deck. "Outstanding if you're sitting up there looking down on it like it's a damn board game."

Bessy, a Herculean, half-crane-half-bulldozer Caterpillar tractor, custom built for the US Navy, sat chained to the deck behind the superstructure. A gang of deckhands frantically untangled a web of nylon straps and steel cables and hooked them to a big U-bolt on the end of Bessy's powerful hydraulic arm.

"After you hook on that cradle," O'Reilly shouted over the growl of Bessy's V-10 diesel, "I want the steel plow blade attached up forward!" He climbed atop one of Bessy's gigantic tires and stuck his head inside the cab to speak with the crash and salvage crewman at the wheel. "I want Bessy out there as soon as the Corsair stops on deck."

"Aye aye, Senior Chief," the man shouted back.

"I don't care what anyone says into your headset. I'm the scene leader. I control the situation. You do exactly what I tell you when I tell you. Do you understand?"

"Loud and clear, Senior Chief."

"Good. After I assess the situation, I will give you an order. You must act instantly, regardless of what anyone says into your headset, and I mean anyone! Including the captain! Is this clear?"

Bessy's engine roared and black smoke belched from her exhaust stacks as the crewman stomped on the accelerator. He smiled and said, "Roger that, Senior Chief."

At battle station number one, ten men in silver fireproof suits and oxygen breathing apparatus were standing by. Petty Officer Brewer, O'Reilly's firefighting commando, looked O'Reilly in the eyes and said, "We're ready to put down a thousand gallons of fire-resistant foam, and I've got three men ready to pluck the pilot out of the cockpit."

As O'Reilly briefed the crash crew, the A-7 Corsair circled overhead in a clear blue sky. Its engine rumbled like an angry medieval dragon circling its enemy before swooping in for the kill. O'Reilly pressed the transmit button on his radio. "Control, this is O'Reilly. My firefighters and I are ready when you are. Over."

Airman Conway crouched in the catwalk clutching a fire extinguisher. O'Reilly leaned over and grabbed the front of Conway's vest. He pulled the young man close and said, "Remove that shit eating grin, and listen closely to a direct order."

Conway's smirk vanished, his eyes opened wide behind his safety goggles.

"When I jump out of this catwalk you will be on my heels with that fire extinguisher. Do you understand?"

"Yeah, sure," Conway said, full of nervous energy. He blinked and licked his lips.

"If I'm close to anything hot you will spray me with cool water. Is this clear, airman?"

Conway's brow furrowed. "I've got your back, Senior Chief," Conway said. "I'll be right in there with you!"

The jet engine's tremendous roar consumed the ship as the bomb-laden A-7 touched down in the landing area. The tailhook snagged an arresting cable, and the attack aircraft screeched one final time, like a mythical beast pulled down from the sky. The A-7's landing gear, not designed to support the excess weight of the bombs on the wings, collapsed completely and her tires blew out. Chunks of black rubber and steel belts sprayed across the flight deck. As the magnesium

wheel rims contacted the steel of the deck, they instantly scraped away the black nonskid surface, causing metal-to-metal contact and a fantastic spray of silver sparks. The jet lurched forward into a violent spin.

O'Reilly and Conway sprang from the catwalk and bolted toward the landing area. The arresting cable went taut and yanked the jet to a cockeyed stop before it could spin out of control.

The pilot pulled a ripcord between his legs and the cockpit's Plexiglas canopy shot into the sky. He retracted the tailhook, cut the engine and unbuckled himself from the seat.

Bessy's diesel roared as she drove out from behind the superstructure into the landing area. Brewer's team sprayed a blanket of fire-resistant foam around the jet. Two men held a ladder against the fuselage, while a third climbed up and took the pilot over his shoulder in a fireman's carry.

O'Reilly was already standing under the port wing.

For several scorching seconds he felt a sense of privacy, almost loneliness. Where the magnesium rim had scraped the deck, it now glowed with an arc welder's bluish-white brilliance. The blast of heat made the scar on O'Reilly's right thigh sing. For an infinitesimal fraction of a second, he was young again and he was standing behind that old chief, watching the man run toward a jet on fire. O'Reilly saw the cluster bomb erupt and the blast of fiery bits consuming that old chief, and then he flashed back to the present.

Four quarter-ton bombs hung less than two feet above the intense heat rising from the hot burning magnesium wheel rim. Pressurized jet fuel sprayed from cracks in the underside of the A-7's damaged wing. The taste of fuel numbed O'Reilly's lips. It misted around him. It dribbled down the fuselage and splattered on the deck.

Water from Airman Conway's fire extinguisher splashed on the back of O'Reilly's neck, flowed down the furrow of his spine.

Flames shot up the side of the jet's fuselage and instantly bubbled and blackened the paint. Smoke seethed from the tire rubber tangled around the burning magnesium wheel.

O'Reilly glanced down and saw flames flashing across the jet fuel puddle, tearing at the blanket of fire resistant foam.

He stepped back.

He reached for the radio transmit button.

Jet fuel ran down, dribbling and dripping on the quarter-ton bombs and he realized, I've got an out-of-control situat—

Their eyes closed against the searing orange heat as jet fuel vapors ignited in the air around them.

Fire burned on their faces.

Eyebrows and sideburns incinerated instantly.

The bombs were on fire. The gold wires inside the detonators melted. The detonators spun. In less than ninety seconds, a ton of TNT would detonate on the flight deck.

With flames flashing over his vest and his pants, he ran out from under the A-7's wing. Conway ran beside O'Reilly, spraying him with water.

Exposed skin on O'Reilly's hands and neck burned, but he got his thumb to the radio transmit button. "All hands stand back!" He coughed out smoke as he spoke. "Bessy, scuttle this aircraft immediately. Push it directly over the side now."

As Brewer took O'Reilly in a bear hug with a fireproof blanket, Captain Stone growled in O'Reilly's ears, "You must save the aircraft!"

Bessy's steel plow crunched against the Corsair's tail and pushed it toward the deck edge.

"Not possible, sir," O'Reilly replied.

Metal screeching against metal drowned out the captain's curses.

Bessy and the Corsair were like fighting metal monsters engulfed in flames, but quickly the Corsair tumbled over the side of the ship and splashed into the sea.

O'Reilly sat on the deck, hearing none of it. He and Diane were already cruising Arizona highways. They sat in plush velour captain's chairs, in air-conditioned splendor, looking over an expansive dashboard. A spectacular view filled the enormous windshield. Sandstone bronze and orange mesas rose into a brilliant blue sky above a sage and cactus-speckled desert.

When the corpsmen arrived, O'Reilly mumbled, "Grand Canyon. My girl and I are going to the Grand Canyon in sixty-four days."

