

Neil A. Armstrong  
Pensacola Pre-Flight Class 5-49



“A boyish-looking Neil Armstrong pictured during some R&R in Hawaii.”

1951

Ensign Neil Armstrong flew F9F *Panthers* with VF-51 off USS *Essex* (CV-9) and had to bail out of his aircraft on one mission after being hit by anti-aircraft fire. He became a Naval Aviator [Flying Midshipman] at age 19 and flew in combat in the Korean War. Later he became a research pilot and flew the X-15 experimental rocket plane at approximately 6,400 kilometers per hour and to an altitude of more than 60,000 meters. He has flown more than 3,500 hours, including 2,500 hours in jet planes. Armstrong was born in the small town of Wapakoneta in Ohio on August 5, 1930.

## Neil Armstrong Takes a Hit<sup>1</sup>



... the *Screaming Eagles* launched sorties on 3 September to freight yards between Tochon and Kangsong, near Wonsan. One of the first divisions off included Dick Wenzell and his wingman, ENS Neil Armstrong. Wenzell's second section contained LT Danny Marshall. On hitting landfall, Marshall and his section leader split off, although Marshall kept his radio tuned to Wenzell and Armstrong. He heard "Jink, *Dick Two*, hard

right," and realized enemy AA was tracking Armstrong. The latter, flying below the others, reported "I've taken a good hit in my right tip tank." Wenzell and Armstrong climbed clear to check for damage.

Marshall realized from the dialog that Armstrong had his flaps and gear down. However, part of his wing area had been blown off. CAG Beebe reported that Armstrong "saved his own life with a piece of exceptionally fast headwork." Although he lost elevator control, "he rolled in all the back [elevator trim] tab he could get." His plane dropped so low it sheared off two feet of its starboard wing on a power pole. Gently handling his controls and trim tabs, Armstrong made it to friendly territory to K-3 emergency airfield near Pohang, far to the south along the coast. A lack of elevator control made a landing impossible, so he bailed out (a squadron first) to land safely in the middle of an evil-smelling rice paddy. An *Essex* TBM picked him up, and he was on the flight schedule the next day.

---

<sup>1</sup> Thomas F. Gates, *The Hook*, "The Screaming Eagles in Korea 1950-1953, Fighting 51, Winter 1996.

Bundled in winter flight gear, a division of Screaming Eagles awaits man-up.



From left: LT W.A. Mackay, LT Ken Kramer, ENS Neil Armstrong, and CDR Marshall Beebe (ComCVG-5)

From Hallion's *The Naval Air War in Korea*<sup>2</sup>:

- As an *Essex Panther* strafed a column of trucks near Wonsan, flak knocked the jet into a spinning dive. In its cockpit, the young fighter pilot instinctively regained control over the hurtling plane, recovering into level flight a mere 20 feet off the ground. The Panther immediately collided with a telephone pole, clipping 3 feet from its right wing. Again the pilot managed to regain control, and he staggered back up to 14,000 feet, reaching friendly territory before ejecting safely. Two days later, Ensign Neil Armstrong returned to VF-51. He had displayed the qualities of courage and skill that would lead to his selection as commander of the first lunar landing mission in 1969. [Naval Aviation News, December 1951].
- Another *Essex* airman, [former aviation midshipman] VF-55's Ensign Peter Moriarty, fell victim to flak while on a search mission for a downed airplane. He bailed out. Just after he landed, a North Korean soldier emptied his revolver at him from less than five feet, missing with all six shots. Moriarty, undaunted, bolted from his would-be executioner, sprinted to a rescue helicopter amid rifle fire from other Communist troops, and returned safely to the *Essex*. [Naval Aviation News, February 1953].
- VF-64's Ensign Ed Hofstra [Preflight Class 8-48] pressed a strafing attack against North Korean troops a little too zealously during a coastal armed reconnaissance sweep near Wonsan. He delayed his dive pull-out, and his Corsair hit the ground, scraping off all its external armament (including a napalm bomb, a fuel tank, and eight 100-pound bombs), and bending the propeller blades around the nose of his airplane like a closed flower. As the ordnance went off with a roar, the Corsair

---

<sup>2</sup> Richard P. Hallion, *The Naval War in Korea*. Baltimore: Nautical & Aviation Publishing, 1986,

bounced back into the air, burst into flame, and ricocheted 500 yards offshore before ditching in the sea. Hofstra spent the next three hours paddling frantically away from shore in his raft before a Royal Air Force Sunderland flying boat rescued him. [Naval Aviation News, April 1951].

letter to Pat Francis

5 April, 1998

Thanks for your letter and a chance to comment on our project. It is a big effort and you and Lou are to be commended on all the work you have put into the project. Here are a couple of comments:

Overview: I was born on 5 August, 1930 and am undoubtedly not the youngest of the Flying Midshipmen.  
Reprint from "The Hook": Ken Kramer was probably an Ensign or a LTjg at the time of this picture.

The accident stories: Enclosed is a copy from "First on the Moon" that was quoted. I do not have the Naval Aviation News article, Dick Hallion's "The Naval War in Korea", or "The Hook" to check. But both stories are pretty far off the mark. The F9F-2 was not in a spinning dive, did not get to 20 feet, did not hit a telephone pole. If I remember correctly, my division leader was not Dick Wenzell, but Maj. John Carpenter, USAF, an exchange pilot (although I cannot verify that from my logs).

The story as I remember it was:

I did have elevator control damage.

I did get low.

I hit what I believe was a cable strung across the valley.

It sheared off about 6 feet of the right wing.

I didn't know what the stalling speed would be, but felt uncomfortable at less than 200 knots, where nearly full aileron was required for level flight.

So I jumped out near K-3

I hope this helps. All the best

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Neil", written in a cursive style.

(Pat Francis has the original of this letter.)

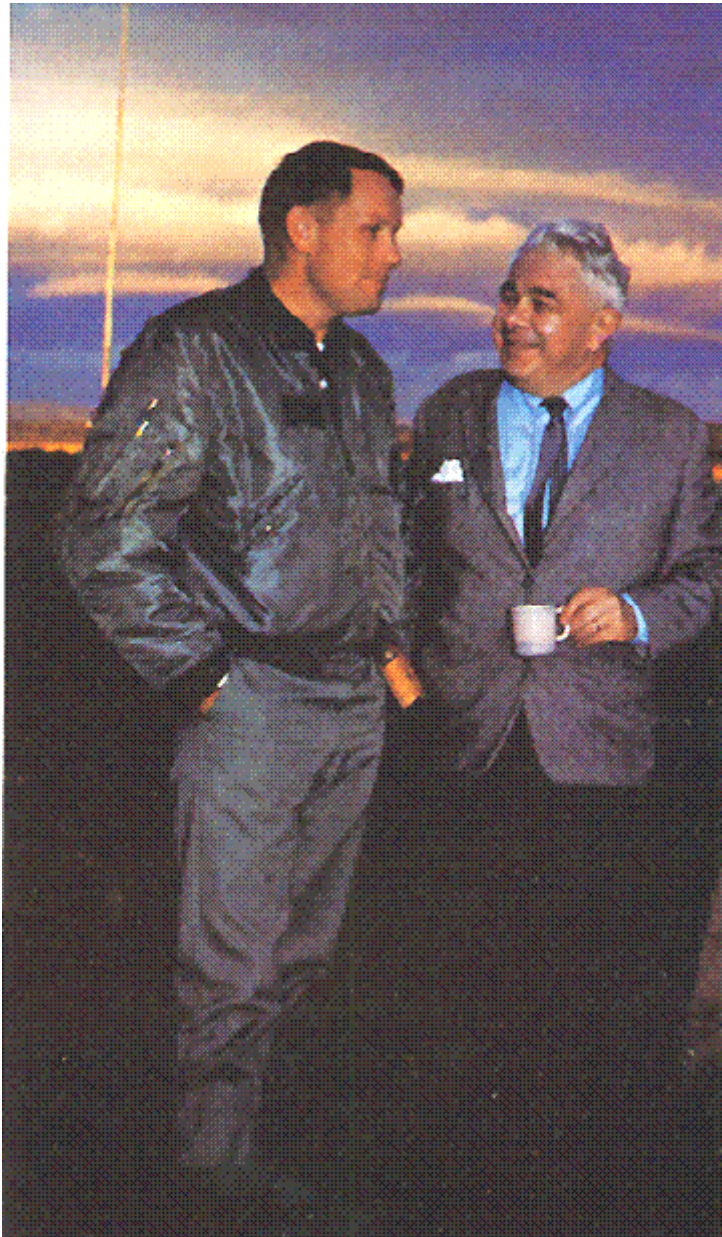
Aviation Midshipmen receive Navy wings.  
August 16<sup>th</sup> 1950, Pensacola, Florida.



Jack Eckstein, Herb Graham, and Neil Armstrong

“Members of Pensacola Pre-Flight Class 5-49 were graduated from Flight Training on the 16<sup>th</sup> of August 1950, shortly after the start of the Korean War. Jack Eckstein, Herb Graham, and Neil Armstrong were among the happy group. After enjoying a short leave in our respective hometowns, I drove to Wapakoneta, Ohio, to pick up Neil, and the two of us continued on to Herb’s home in Stillwater, Oklahoma. The three of us set out on the great adventure, our first orders to duty as Naval Aviators at the Naval Air Station, North Island, California. There we were assigned to a pool of aviators at FASRON SEVEN awaiting the return of Carrier Air Group Five in USS *Valley Forge* that was still deployed in the waters off Korea.”

(photograph from Jack Eckstein)



[Neil] Armstrong talks with Iceland Prime Minister Bjarni Benediktsson

---

From: *Man on the Moon*, prepared by Space Division, North American Rockwell Corporation,  
Published by United States Information Agency



### The Men

The three men chosen to make the flight aboard Apollo 11 all were born in 1930. Two are U.S. Air Force officers, but the commander of the ship is a civilian. All are experienced aviators and all are veterans of previous space flights in earth orbit. They come, however, from vastly different backgrounds: one from a small town in the central United States; one from Washington, D.C., via Rome; and one from a populous industrial area on the east coast of the United States. NEIL ARMSTRONG, the civilian from a small town, is the commander, Michael Collins is the command module pilot, and Edwin Aldrin is the lunar module pilot.

---

From: *Man on the Moon*, prepared by Space Division, North American Rockwell Corporation, Published by United States Information Agency.