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Three crashes early in his career led Navy officials to question or fault his judgment.

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John McCain was training in his AD-6 Skyraider on an overcast Texas morning in 1960 when he slammed into Corpus Christi Bay and sheared the skin off his plane's wings.

McCain recounted the accident decades later in his autobiography. "The engine quit while I was practicing landings," he wrote. But an investigation board at the Naval Aviation Safety Center found no evidence of engine failure.

The 23-year-old junior lieutenant wasn't paying attention and erred in using "a power setting too low to maintain level flight in a turn," investigators concluded.

The crash was one of three early in McCain's aviation career in which his flying skills and judgment were faulted or questioned by Navy officials.

In his most serious lapse, McCain was "clowning" around in a Skyraider over southern Spain about December 1961 and flew into electrical wires, causing a blackout, according to McCain's own account as well as those of naval officers and enlistees aboard the carrier Intrepid. In another incident, in 1965, McCain crashed a T-2 trainer jet in Virginia.

After McCain was sent to Vietnam, his plane was destroyed in an explosion on the deck of an aircraft carrier in 1967. Three months later, he was shot down during a bombing mission over Hanoi and taken prisoner. He was not faulted in either of those cases and was later lauded for his heroism as a prisoner of war.

As a presidential candidate, McCain has cited his military service -- particularly his 5 1/2 years as a POW. But he has been less forthcoming about his mistakes in the cockpit.

The Times interviewed men who served with McCain and located once-confidential 1960s-era accident reports and formerly classified evaluations of his squadrons during the Vietnam War. This examination of his record revealed a pilot who early in his career was cocky, occasionally cavalier and prone to testing limits.

In today's military, a lapse in judgment that causes a crash can end a pilot's career. Though standards were looser and crashes more frequent in the 1960s, McCain's record stands out.

"Three mishaps are unusual," said Michael L. Barr, a former Air Force pilot with 137 combat missions in Vietnam and an internationally known aviation safety expert who teaches in USC's Aviation Safety and Security Program. "After the third accident, you would say: Is there a trend here in terms of his flying skills and his judgment?"

Jeremiah Pearson, a Navy officer who flew 400 missions over Vietnam without a mishap and later became the head of human spaceflight at NASA, said: "That's a lot. You don't want any. Maybe he was just unlucky."

Naval aviation experts say the three accidents before McCain's deployment to Vietnam probably triggered a review to determine whether he should be allowed to continue flying. The results of the review would have been confidential.

The Times asked McCain's campaign to release any military personnel records in the candidate's possession showing how the Navy handled the three incidents. The campaign said it would have no comment.

Navy veterans who flew with McCain called him a good pilot.

"John was what you called a push-the-envelope guy," said Sam H. Hawkins, who flew with McCain's VA-44 squadron in the 1960s and now teaches political science at Florida Atlantic University. "There are some naval aviators who are on the cautious side. They don't get out on the edges, but the edges are where you get the maximum out of yourself and out of your plane. That's where John operated. And when you are out there, you take risks."

The young McCain has often been described as undisciplined and fearless -- a characterization McCain himself fostered in his autobiography.

"In his military career, he was a risk-taker and a daredevil," said John Karaagac, a lecturer at Johns Hopkins' School of Advanced International Studies and the author of a book on McCain. "What was interesting was that he got into accidents, and it didn't rattle his nerves. He takes hits and still stands."

McCain, the son and grandson of admirals, had a privileged status in the Navy. He was invited to the captain's cabin for dinner on the maiden voyage of the Enterprise in 1962, a perk other aviators and sailors attributed to his famous name, recalled Gene Furr, an enlisted man who shared an office and went on carrier deployments with McCain over three years.

On another occasion, McCain was selected to make a commemorative landing on the Enterprise and had his picture taken in front of a cake in the officers' galley, Furr said.

McCain's commanders sarcastically dubbed him "Ace McCain" because of his string of pre-Vietnam accidents, recalled Maurice Rishel, who commanded McCain's VA-65 squadron in early 1961, when it was deployed in the Mediterranean. Still, Rishel said, "he did his job."

McCain was practicing landings in his AD-6 Skyraider over Corpus Christi Bay when he lost several hundred feet of altitude "without realizing it" and struck the water, according to the Naval Aviation Safety Center accident report on file at the Naval Historical Center in Washington.

The plane, a single-engine propeller plane designed for ground attack, sank 10 feet to the bottom of the bay. McCain swam to the surface and was plucked from the water by a rescue helicopter.

While he has contended that the engine quit, investigators collected extensive evidence indicating otherwise. Cockpit instruments that froze on impact showed the engine was still producing power. When water quenched the exhaust stack, it preserved a bright blue color, showing that the engine was still hot. And an aviator behind McCain reported that the engine was producing the black smoke characteristic of Skyraiders.

Investigators determined that McCain was watching instruments in his cockpit that indicated the position of his landing gear and had lost track of his altitude and speed.

The report concluded: "In the opinion of the board, the pilot's preoccupation in the cockpit . . . coupled with the use of a power setting too low to maintain level flight in a turn were the primary causes of this accident."

Southern Spain, around December 1961

McCain was on a training mission when he flew low and ran into electrical wires. He brought his crippled Skyraider back to the Intrepid, dragging 10 feet of wire, sailors and aviators recalled.

In his 1999 autobiography, "Faith of My Fathers," McCain briefly recounts the incident, calling it the result of "daredevil clowning" and "flying too low." McCain did not elaborate on what happened, and The Times could find no military records of the accident.

When he struck the wires, McCain severed an oil line in his plane, said Carl Russ, a pilot in McCain's squadron. McCain's flight suit and the cockpit were soaked in oil, added Russ, who nonetheless said McCain was a good pilot.

The next day, McCain went to the flight deck with his superior officers and some of the crew to inspect the damage. A gaggle of sailors surrounded the plane.

Clark Sherwood, an enlistee responsible for hanging ordnance on the squadron's planes, recalled standing on the deck with McCain. "I said, 'You're lucky to be alive.' McCain said, 'You bet your ass I am,'" Sherwood said. "He almost bought the farm." Sherwood, now a real estate agent in New Jersey, said he considered McCain a hero.

Calvin Shoemaker, a retired test pilot for the Skyraider's manufacturer, Douglas Aircraft, said extended low-level flights are difficult in any aircraft and for that reason Skyraiders were seldom flown at altitudes below 500 feet.

After hearing a description of McCain's record, Shoemaker said the aviator appeared to be a "flat-hatter," an old aviation term for a showoff.

Cape Charles, Va., Nov. 28, 1965

Over the Eastern Shore of Virginia, McCain descended below 7,000 feet on a landing approach in a T-2 trainer jet, according to accident records. He said he heard an explosion in his engine and lost power. He said he tried unsuccessfully to restart the engine.

He spotted a local drag strip and considered trying to glide to a landing there but finally had to eject at 1,000 feet. The plane crashed in the woods. McCain escaped injury and was picked up by a farmer.

In his autobiography, McCain said he had flown on a Saturday to Philadelphia to watch the annual Army-Navy football game with his parents. The accident report does not mention Philadelphia but rather indicates that McCain departed from a now-closed Navy field in New York City on Sunday afternoon and was headed to Norfolk, Va.

In a report dated Jan. 18, 1966, the Naval Aviation Safety Center said it could not determine the cause of the accident or corroborate McCain's account of an explosion in the engine. A close examination of the engine found "no discrepancies which would have caused or contributed to engine failure or malfunction."

The report found that McCain, then assigned to squadron VT-7 in Meridian, Miss., had made several errors: He failed to switch the plane's power system to battery backup, which "seriously jeopardized his survival chances." His idea of landing on the drag strip was "viewed with concern and is indicative of questionable emergency procedure."

The report added, "It may be indeed fortunate that the pilot was not in a position to attempt such a landing."

McCain also ejected too late and too low, was not wearing proper flight equipment and positioned his body improperly before ejecting, the report said.

The official record includes comments from pilots in his own squadron who defended McCain's actions as "proper and timely."

About two weeks after issuing its report, the safety center revised its findings and said the accident resulted from the failure or malfunction of an "undetermined component of the engine."

Edward M. Morrison, a mechanic for VT-7 who is now retired and living in Washington state, said that

the plane McCain checked out that day had just been refurbished and that he knew of no engine problems.

"McCain came to the flight line that day, carrying his dress whites, and said, 'Give me a pretty plane,' " Morrison said. "Nobody had ever asked me for a pretty plane before. I gave him this one because it was freshly painted. The next time I saw him, I said, 'Don't ever ask me for a pretty plane again.' I think he laughed."

In Vietnam

McCain was a pilot on the carrier Forrester, off the coast of Vietnam, when one of the worst accidents in Navy history killed 134 crew members and damaged or destroyed various aircraft, including McCain's.

On July 29, 1967, he and other pilots were preparing for a bombing raid when a Zuni rocket from one of the planes misfired.

The rocket hit the plane next to McCain's, killing the pilot, igniting jet fuel and touching off a chain of explosions, according to the Navy investigation. McCain, who jumped from the nose of his jet and ran through the flames, suffered minor shrapnel wounds.

Three months later, McCain was on his 23rd bombing mission over North Vietnam when a surface-to-air missile struck his A-4 attack jet. He was flying 3,000 feet above Hanoi.

A then-secret report issued in 1967 by McCain's squadron said the aviators had learned to stay at an altitude of 4,000 to 10,000 feet in heavy surface-to-air missile environments and look for approaching missiles.

"Once the SAM was visually acquired, it was relatively easy to outmaneuver it by a diving maneuver followed by a high-G pull-up. The critical problem comes during multiple SA-II attacks (6-12 missiles), when it is not possible to see or maneuver with each missile."

The American aircraft had instruments that warned pilots with a certain tone when North Vietnamese radar tracked them and another tone when a missile locked on them.

In his autobiography, McCain said 22 missiles were fired at his squadron that day. "I knew I should roll out and fly evasive maneuvers, 'jinking,' in fliers' parlance, when I heard the tone," he wrote. But, he said, he continued on and released his bombs. Then a missile blew off his right wing.

Vietnam veterans said McCain did exactly what they did on almost every mission.

Frank Tullo, an Air Force pilot who flew 100 missions over North Vietnam, said his missile warning receiver constantly sounded in his cockpit.

"Nobody broke off on a bombing run," said Tullo, later a commercial pilot and now an accident investigation instructor at USC. "It was a matter of manhood."

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