

# Breaking into Prison

By Maj Antonio Granados, USMCR (Ret), reprinted with permission from *Foundation* magazine.

There came a time in June 1945 when, as a 22-year-old *Corsair* pilot, I was ordered to fly a brand new *Corsair* fighter from its assembly plant in Trenton, New Jersey to San Diego, California. At that time, many planes of all types were being sent to the West Coast in preparation for the invasion of Japan. I saw this assignment as a great coup because it gave me a chance to fly the latest model *Corsair*, the new *F4U-4*, which was the hottest fighter in the air at that time.

On the way to San Diego, my first stop was Petersburg, Virginia. The mechanic, who re-filled my gas tank, told me that I had a leak in my fuel system because there was hardly any fuel left in my tank and he knew that I had been in the air for only about two hours. I thanked him for sharing and, in my egotistic sense of immortality, I promptly blew him off and prepared to go to my next stop in Atlanta.

At Atlanta, the plane revealed a bad oil leak so I grounded it. While the mechanics were working on the oil leak, they found a large, unconnected, loose valve, about the size of a large fist, stuck among some hoses in the engine compartment. This was not good. They removed the valve, fixed the oil leak and I went on to my next stop, Shreveport, Louisiana.

I had to ground the airplane again at Shreveport because the magnetos didn't check out. I stayed overnight while the mags were fixed. The next morning, I took off for my next stop, Fort Worth, Texas. I had to ground the plane again at Fort Worth because of a serious hydraulic leak. I began wondering whether I was flying a jinxed plane. Automobiles like this are called "lemons." However, a "lemon" automobile and a "lemon"

high performance fighter plane are on two very different levels of reality. My immortality kicked in again, and I reasoned that brand new airplanes were known to have a few bugs in them and I needed to move on.



Major Antonio Granados, here a second lieutenant, crouches on the wings of his *F4U Corsair* at USMC Auxiliary Field, Congaree, South Carolina, in 1945. This squadron was flying an earlier model of the *Corsair* than the *F4U-4* featured in the article; the *F4U-4* had greater horsepower and a four-bladed prop that gave the aircraft better speed, climb rate and overall performance.

The mechs fixed the hydraulic problem and I took off to my next stop, Midland, Texas. When I landed at Midland, I reported smelling fuel while flying and I wanted the mechanics to check all the gas lines because of what the mech in Petersburg told me about a probable fuel leak. No leaks were

found so I took off for Coolidge, Arizona, my last stop before San Diego. I landed at Coolidge without incident and spent the night there.

The next morning, I took off for San Diego. As I was climbing out of the field, gaining altitude to go over the mountains, I got a very strong odor of gas. I looked down at my feet and saw a very generous spray of 100 octane gas spraying on my left foot. This was like being inside a carburetor! A spark could blow this plane and me to kingdom come, I turned back to the field and carefully opened my canopy to flush out the vaporized gas. After I was sure the cockpit was clear I felt free to use my "sparking" radio equipment. I called the tower for an emergency landing and told them my problem. I requested that they have the fire trucks, the ambulance (affectionately known as the "meat wagon") and the crash crew standing by while I landed. The landing was uneventful except that the fire trucks and crash crew wouldn't come near my plane for fear that it might explode. I couldn't blame them.

The mechs worked on the plane for about five hours tightening up every gas line they could find. They told me that they were sure all was well and asked that I take the plane up for a test hop around the field before heading to San Diego. I agreed and took the plane up to 10,000 feet. It seemed OK. I kicked it around a bit and then subjected it to negative g's by doing a slow roll. When I did the slow roll about a half gallon of gas dumped on my left foot. Another emergency landing ensued with all the rituals involved therein.

The mechs were puzzled. They didn't know what more to do. In deference to the very conscientious and very professional mechanics, this was not an

# Granados' Corsair Adventure

easy job. A major problem in finding the source of a gas leak is that, unlike oil, gas evaporates and leaves no residue to indicate its source, especially in the 100 degree Arizona desert. The mechs took half the engine apart but could not find the source of the leak. They worked on the plane for most of the day and finally told me that they did everything possible to stop any leak that could possibly be anywhere. They requested another test hop and I agreed.

I took off and climbed to 10,000 feet without incident. I again kicked the plane around to make sure there was no leak or smell of gas. Everything seemed well. Next came the negative g test. I rolled the plane over on its back and fire immediately broke out in the cockpit under the instrument panel. It was hot and there was lots of it. I got the plane right side up and immediately opened the canopy, unfastened my seat belt and shoulder harness and started going over the side away from the flames. I knew I had less than a minute before the fire would burn through one of the many large, composite fuel lines under the instrument panel. Since I was over the desert, I didn't have to worry about where the plane was going to go, I just had to concentrate on where I was going to go - OUT. I climbed over the side of the cockpit and was streaming along the length of the fuselage holding on to the plane with one foot against the back edge of the cockpit canopy. The air stream was so powerful that it was holding my foot there with no effort on my part. The plane was screaming down to mother earth like a fiery meteor, and it was taking me with it.

There was another complication to this saga in that the cockpit on a *Corsair* sits way back, past the center of the airplane, which means that to bail out, one must miss the horizontal sta-

bilizer on the tail of the plane. Hitting the horizontal stabilizer killed many pilots attempting to bail out of a *Corsair* or, in some cases, entangled their chutes, taking them down with the plane. I knew all of this and I knew that the name of the game, at this stage, was to miss the stabilizer. In my case, because I was stretched along the

my near terminal velocity and started my decent. The plane crashed into the desert about three miles from the air-base. Other than the engine that was almost buried, the plane spread itself into thousands of tiny bits and pieces over a quarter-mile area.

Despite the excellent training I received as a Naval Aviator, it was never mentioned that there is no sensation of falling while floating down in a parachute. Instead of feeling like I was falling, I felt like I was hanging in the air, so I decided to "slip" the chute to ensure my decent. I pulled on one half of the risers to spill the air from the chute canopy, but I still had no sensation of descending. I then pulled on the risers with all my weight. Suddenly the chute flapped and almost collapsed! I thought I'd better leave well enough alone and decided to not try that again. I have often wondered how many pilots who bailed out at altitude and had the same experience as I did unintentionally collapsed their chutes and plummeted to earth.

I felt very relieved floating in the blue Arizona sky until I looked down and saw that I was going to land in a desert full of Saguaro cacti. These are huge cacti with massive arms. They are about 15 to 20 feet tall and are covered with long, needle-sharp spines - not something you would want to slam your body into.

Fortunately, my luck was still with me. I missed the cacti and did a forward roll on landing while my chute settled into a huge Saguaro cactus. That was good because it kept me from being dragged over the ground by the desert wind. I picked up my chute and started walking toward some buildings that I could see were not very far away. As I was approaching the buildings I met an older man who was hoeing a vegetable garden. *continued...*



These photos (also from Congaree, 1945) come from Kodachrome slides provided by Major Granados. Kodachrome film is famous for its image quality and longevity, and photos such as these enable us to see an era typically imagined in black and white in its true color. (Antonio Granados collection)



length of the fuselage, it was about one foot away from my face waiting for me to let go. I had no options. I had to take the chance of missing it or hitting it. I kicked away from the plane as hard as I could with my other foot and I think I went over the stabilizer. Anyhow, I missed it. I went tumbling through the air about 8,000 feet up thinking, with a great sigh of relief, that "I made it!" I pulled the D-ring that popped the chute, received a severe jolt because of

## Chutes and Cacti

When I explained what happened he offered to carry my chute and go with me to the buildings. As we came up to the door of the main building, I asked my newfound friend, "By the way, what is this place and what's it doing way out here alone in the desert?" He said that I had landed in the Arizona State Prison. With that, two angry prison guards bolted out of the door with shotguns shouting demands, with many expletives, wanting to know who we were and what we were doing there. Then I realized that the man who helped me was a prisoner, a trusty who was allowed to work in the prison vegetable garden. He and I were dressed alike, both in khaki, which was the general fashion for men during World War II.

The guards at first took me for a prisoner. They started yelling at me and barking orders. I asked for a chance, Sir, to explain the situation, which I did as a Marine in my very best, educated tongue. They immediately became quite friendly and quite helpful.

I asked permission to use their telephone so that I could tell the Navy that I was OK. I knew that the Navy would be more than concerned. I learned from the phone call that the Navy had already sent personnel to the crash site to collect any remains and to discern any evidence or odor of burned flesh that would help confirm my death.

Needless to say, the Navy was delighted to hear from me if for no other reason than they wouldn't have to deal with a ton of paperwork and forms to explain my sudden death.

The Navy immediately sent an ambulance with some corpsmen to the prison to pick me up and render whatever medical aid I might need. In the meantime, I asked the prison officials for some first-aid because I had picked up a lot of dried cactus needles in my legs from doing the prescribed forward roll when I landed. No problem. They sent me with a two-guard escort to the prison "Doc."

To get to the Doc, I had to go through the fenced-in prison yard escorted by the two armed guards. The "Yard," about 200 yards square, was where the prisoners meandered out-of-doors during recreation periods. The guards took me to a big rusty gate that creaked open. We stepped inside the gate and faced another gate. The gate closed behind us and then the gate we faced opened. We walked into the yard where the prisoners were hanging out and frankly, I wasn't too comfortable being a "fake" prisoner in that environment. What a tough looking bunch of characters! These guys were the cream of the Arizona sociopaths. They were so incorrigible and violent that none of the military services would take them even in the middle of the war. Again, I



Here Major Granados stands beside a Saguaro cactus near Coolidge, Arizona. Saguaro cacti can grow to the size of trees and are precarious obstacles for any pilot that must bail out over the Arizona desert. Granados collection

was thought to be a prisoner because I was dressed in khaki like the others and I looked a bit scruffy from the bailout. I think they thought I had caused some trouble or tried to escape and that's why I had armed guards on either side of me. The whole yard began whistling



The wreckage of the *Corsair*. Note the backs of three .50-caliber machine guns, formerly in the right wing of the aircraft, buried on impact in the lower right-hand corner. Granados collection



Another view of the crash site as Major Granados inspects the wreckage. Much of the aircraft has been rendered unrecognizable. Granados collection

# Caterpillar Club

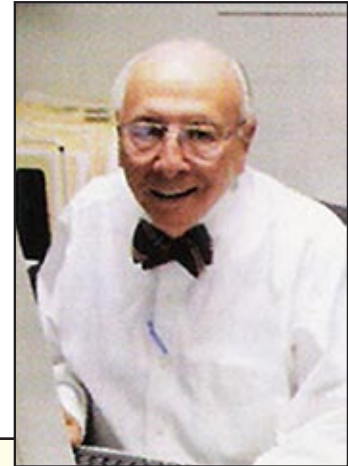
the *Laurel and Hardy* theme song in unison and in step with our walking. It was their way of showing contempt for the guards and the prison. I burst out laughing; this was an excellent example of peaceful defiance to authority in a very limiting environment.

The prison Doc had a cynical smirk built into his face from his hard life, and his medical knowledge was limited to applying iodine wherever it was believed to be needed. His medical supplies consisted of a roll of adhesive tape, some bandages and an industrial size bottle of iodine. They were all on a small shelf in his dirt-floor ER. After the Doc pulled a lot of cactus needles out of my legs and applied the “one-size-fits-all” iodine, I was escorted out of the yard. By then, the prisoners knew the whole story and gathered around me as if I had just dropped in from Mars. As we walked along, I said to the guards, “I know you’ve heard of a lot of guys breaking out of prison but I bet this is the first time you’ve ever

heard of anyone breaking into prison.” We all laughed. The guards agreed that I was the first.

You might be interested to know that after the bailout, I wrote a letter to the Switlik Parachute Company in Trenton, New Jersey. This is the company that made the parachute that I used. I wanted to thank them for saving my life. They responded with a nice letter inducting me into a very exclusive club called “The Caterpillar Club.” To become a member of the Caterpillar Club you must have saved your life through an emergency parachute jump from an aircraft. Besides the letter of induction, they sent me a personalized certificate, which I have framed, and a sterling silver pin in the form of a caterpillar. Why a caterpillar? Because silk worms are caterpillars and all parachutes at that time were made of the best silk. Does that mean that I owe my life to a worm? In a word, yes. I think that this somehow suggests that all things on earth are interconnected.

Antonio Granados



Antonio Granados was born on 20 August 1922 in Riverdale, Maryland. He was sworn into the U.S. Navy V-5 Program in October 1942 and almost two years later received his wings. He served with many different squadrons including VMF-521 and VMF-523. He transferred to MCAS Quantico in January 1946 and three months later was released from active duty. He entered reserve duty soon after with VMF-451 at NAS Willow Grove and fought in Korea from 1951-1952 with VMF-323 and VMF-312. As a fighter pilot, he flew 82 missions in Korea, 52 from land bases and 30 from USS *Bairoko* (CVE-115). Granados was awarded two Distinguished Flying Crosses, four Air Medals and an assortment of other lesser medals and campaign ribbons. In March 1946, he married the former Rita Cecelia Flood and together they had six children. Granados spent his time outside of his military service in advertising and marketing, commencing when he graduated from the Wharton School, University of Pennsylvania in 1948. Recently, after 59 years in advertising, Major Granados has reluctantly retired.



This is Major Granados’ certificate of membership into the Caterpillar Club on 5 June 1945. Several such stories have been featured throughout *Foundation’s* history as these events, despite the humor often injected into the stories, are some of the most traumatic and dangerous an aviator can experience. Granados collection