# Cat

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It was a cat, a gray Persian cat. It had no name and it sat very carefully in the tall grass at the end of the runway, studying the fighter planes as they touched down in France for the first time.

The cat did not flinch as the ten-ton jet fighters whistled airily by, nosewheels still in the air and drag chutes waiting to spring from their little houses beneath the tailpipes. Its yellow eyes watched calmly, appraising the quality of the touchdowns, angled ears listening for the faint pouf! of the late-blossoming drag chutes, head turning serenely after one landing to watch the final approach and touchdown of the next. Now and then a touchdown was hard, and the eyes narrowed ever so slightly for an instant as the soft paw-pads felt the jar of airplane and soil for an instant as an airplane did not correct for crosswind, and great gouts of blue rubber-smoke angled from tortured wheels.

The cat watched the landings for three hours in the cold of an October afternoon, until twenty-seven airplanes had landed and the sky was empty and the last whine of dying engines had faded from the parking revetments across the field. Then the Persian stood suddenly, and without even a feline stretch of graceful body, trotted away to disappear in the tall grass. The 167th Tactical Fighter Squadron had arrived in Europe.

When a fighter squadron is reactivated after fifteen years of nonexistence, there are a few problems. With the barest nucleus of experienced pilots in a squadron of thirty, the 167th’s problems centered around pilot proficiency. Twenty-four of its air crews had been graduated from gunnery training schools within the year before reactivation.

“We can do it, Bob, and do a good job of it,” said Major Carl Langley to his squadron commander. “This isn’t the first time I’ve been an operations officer, and I tell you I’ve never seen a bunch of pilots who are more eager to learn this business than the ones we have right here.”

Major Robert Rider pounded his fist lightly against the rough wooden wall of his office-to-be. “That point I will grant you,” he said. “But you and I have a job cut out for us. This is Europe, and you know European weather in the winter. Aside from our flight commanders, young Henderson has more weather time than any other pilot in the squadron, and he only has eleven hours of it. Eleven hours! Carl, are you looking forward to leading a four-ship flight of these pilots, in old F-84s, through twenty thousand feet of weather? Or to a GCA touchdown on a wet runway in a crosswind?” He glanced out the dirt-streaked window. High overcast, good visibility beneath, he noted unconsciously. “I’m going to run this squadron, and I’m going to run it well; but I’ll tell you that I can’t help but think that before the new 167th is a real combat-ready outfit, a couple of our boys are going to be scattered across the sides of mountains. I’m not looking forward to that.”

Carl Langley’s ice-blue eyes sparkled with the challenge. He was at his best doing the job that anyone else would have called impossible. “They’ve got the knowledge. They probably know instrument flying better than you and I, they’re so fresh out of school. All they need is experience. We’ve got a Link. We can run that thing ten hours a day and fill our pilots with every instrument approach for every base in France. They volunteered to join the 167th, and they want to work for the squadron. It’s up to you and me to work ’em.”

The squadron commander smiled suddenly. “When you talk like that, I can almost accuse you of being eager yourself.” He paused, and then spoke slowly. “I remember the old 167th, in England in 1944. We had the new Thunderbolt then, and we painted our little Persian battle-cat on its side. We weren’t afraid of anything the Luftwaffe could get into the air. Eager in peace is brave in war, I guess.” He nodded to his operations officer. “Can’t say that I think we won’t have our share of in-flight emergencies with this old airplane or that we won’t need a lot of good luck before the boys start giving a meaning back to this squadron,” he said. “But draw up your Link and flying schedules starting tomorrow and we’ll begin to see just how good our youngsters really are.”

In a moment Major Robert Rider stood alone in his darkening office, and he thought of the old 167th. Sadly. Of Lieutenant John Buckner, trapped in a burning Thunderbolt, who still attacked a pair of unwary Focke-Wulfs and took one of them with him into the hard ground of France. Of Lieutenant Jack Bennett, with six kills and glory assured, who deliberately rammed an ME-109 that was closing to destroy a crippled B-17 over Strasbourg. Of Lieutenant Alan Spencer, who brought back a Thunderbolt so badly damaged by cannonfire that he had to be freed from the wreckage of his crash landing by a crew with cutting torches. Rider had seen him after the crash. “It was the same ’190 that got Jim Park,” he had said from the whiteness of the hospital bed. “Black snakes down the side of the fuselage. And I said, ‘Today, Al, it’s going to be you or him, but one of us isn’t going to make it home.’ I was the lucky one.” Alan Spencer volunteered to go back into combat when he was released from the hospital, and he did not return from his next mission over France. No one heard him call, no one saw his airplane hit. He simply didn’t come back. Despite their battle-cat insignia, the 167th pilots did not have nine lives. Or even two.



Eager in peace is brave in war, Rider thought, looking absently at the scar along the back of his left hand, his throttle hand. It was wide and white, the kind of scar left only after an encounter with a Messerschmitt’s thirty-caliber machine-gun bullet. But eagerness is not enough. If we’re going to make it through the winter without losing a pilot, we’ll need more than eagerness. We’ve got to have skill and we’ve got to have experience. So thinking, he walked outside into the overcast night.

The days whipped quickly by for Second Lieutenant Jonathan Heinz. All this talk of weather and look out for Europe in the winter was nonsense, sheer nonsense. November was bright and spilling with sun. December was ready to spring onto the calendar and the base had had only four days of low ceilings, which the pilots spent working on the ops officer’s latest instrument quiz. Major Langley’s instrument quizzes had become a standard of the squadron; a new one every third day, twenty questions, one wrong answer allowed. Fail a test and you stay another three hours at the flight line with the instrument manuals, until you pass the alternate test, one wrong answer allowed.



Heinz pressed the starter switch of his aging Thunder-streak, winced in the concussion of a good start, and taxied to the runway behind Bob Henderson’s airplane. But that’s the way to get to know instruments, he thought. At first everyone was staying the three hours and cursing the day that they volunteered for the 167th Tactical Fighter Squadron. Tactical Instrument Squadron, they called it. Then you got the knack of it, and it seemed somehow that you knew more and more of the answers. It was pretty rare now to have to stay the three hours.

There was a little thud in the engine’s roar when Heinz retracted his engine screens before takeoff, but all the engine instruments showed normal, and strange noises and little thuds are not unusual in the F-84. Oddly enough, though, at a time when he usually noticed little but the instruments and the leader’s airplane rocking firmly against full throttle and locked brakes, Jonathan Heinz noticed a gray Persian cat sitting calmly at the edge of the runway a few hundred feet ahead of his airplane. Cat must be completely deaf, he thought. His engine, linked to the thick black throttle under his left glove, crackled and roared and spun blue fire through stainless-steel turbine blades to unchain seventy-eight hundred pounds of thrust within his airplane.

He was ready to roll, and he nodded to Henderson. Then, for no reason, he pressed the microphone button under his left thumb on the throttle. “There’s a cat out on the edge of the runway,” he said into the microphone set into his green-rubber oxygen mask. There was a short silence.

“Roj on the cat,” Henderson said seriously, and Heinz felt foolish. He saw the mobile control officer in his miniature control tower at the right side of the runway reach for his binoculars. Why did I say a dumb stupid thing like that, he thought. I will not say one more word this flight. Radio discipline, Heinz, radio discipline! He released his brakes at the nod of Henderson’s white helmet, and the two airplanes gathered a great reserve of speed and lifted into the air.

Eight minutes later Heinz was talking again. “Sahara Leader, I got an aft overheat light and the rpm’s surging about five percent. Power’s back, light’s still on. Check me for smoke, will you?” What a calm voice you have, he thought. You talk too much, but at least you’re calm. Sixty hours in the ’84 and you should be calm. Take it easy now and try not to sound like a little kid on the radio. I’ll turn around and drop the external tanks, fly a simulated flameout pattern, and land. I couldn’t be on fire.

“No sign of smoke, Sahara Two. How’s it doing now?”

Calm voice, Heinz. “Still surging, Leader. Fuel flow and tailpipe temp are going back and forth with it. I’m going to drop the tanks and land.”

“OK, Two, I’ll keep an eye for smoke and handle the radio calls if you’d like. But be ready to jump out of the bird if she starts to burn.”

“Roj.” I’m ready to jump out, Heinz thought. Just raise the ejection seat armrest and squeeze the trigger. But I think I can get the airplane back down all right. He listened to Henderson declare an emergency, and as he descended slowly into the flameout pattern he saw the square red fire trucks burst from their garages and race to their alert slots at the taxiways. He could feel the engine surge in the throttle. It will be sort of touch-and-go here. I’ll drop the tanks on final approach before I get down to five hundred feet, I’ll pull the nose up and eject. Below five hundred feet, I’ll have to take it on in, no matter what. He brought the throttle back to give an engine speed of fifty-eight percent rpm, and the heavy airplane dropped more quickly through the pattern. Flaps down. I have the field made, for sure … Gear down. The wheels locked in place. He passed through four hundred feet. Thud. Thudthud. A big surge.

“There’s a lot of smoke from your tailpipe, Sahara.”

Wouldn’t you know it! This thing’s going to explode on me, and I’m too low to bail out. What do I do now? He pressed the drop tank jettison button and the airplane bounced a little as four thousand pounds of fuel fell away. A harsh grinding from the engine, behind him. He noticed, suddenly, that the oil pressure was at zero.

A frozen engine, Heinz! You got no flight control with a frozen engine. What now, what now? The control stick went solid and immovable in his gloves.

The officer in mobile control did not know about the frozen engine. He did not know that Sahara Two would make a gentle roll to the right and strike the ground inverted, or that Jonathan Heinz was helpless and committed to die. “You have a cat by the runway,” the mobile officer said, with the mild relaxed humor of one who knows that danger has passed.

And it came to Heinz suddenly. In a burst of light. Emergency hydraulic pump, the electric pump! His airplane was beginning to roll, a hundred feet in the air. His glove smashed the pump switch to EMERG, and the stick came alive again, quickly. Wings level, nose up, nose up, and a beautiful touchdown in front of mobile. At least it felt beautiful. Throttle off, drag chute out, fuel off, battery off, canopy open and be ready to jump out of the thing. The giant square fire trucks, scarlet lights blazing atop their cabs, roared along next to him as he slowed through thirty knots on the landing roll. His airplane was completely quiet, and Heinz could hear the truck engines, sounding like great inboard cruiser engines, laboring in high gear. In a moment he had rolled to a stop, unstrapped from the cockpit, and jumped down to stand behind a fire truck that hosed thick white foam on a broad patch of discolored aluminum aft of the wing root.

The airplane looked forlorn, unwilling to be the center of such concentrated attention. But it was down, and it was in one piece. Jonathan Heinz was very much alive, and not a little bit famous. “Nice going, ace,” the pilots would say, and they’d ask him about how it felt and what he thought and what he did and when, and there would be the routine accident investigation and there could be no other conclusion than well done, Lieutenant Heinz. No one would guess that he came within a few seconds of dying because he had completely forgotten, like a brand-new pilot, about the emergency hydraulic pump. Completely forgotten … and what had reminded him? What had snapped his thought to the red-covered switch at the last instant that it could save him? Nothing. It had just come to him.

Heinz thought some more. It had not just come. Mobile control told me about the cat by the runway, and I remembered the pump. There’s an odd one for you. I’d like to meet that cat.

He looked down the long white runway. He could see no cat. Even the mobile control officer, with his binoculars, could not then have seen any cat. The squadron was later to ride him unmercifully about his unlucky cat, but at that moment, by the runway or across the whole of the base, there was no such thing as a gray Persian cat.

It happened again, less than a week later, to another second lieutenant. Jack Willis had almost finished his first simulated combat mission after completing his checkout in the F-84. It had been a good mission, but now, in the landing pattern, he was worried. Twenty-knot crosswind, where did that come from? It was ten knots down the runway when we took off, and now it’s twenty knots across. He rolled his airplane level on the downwind leg of the pattern. “Say again the wind, please, tower,” he called.

“Roj,” the tower’s last explanation was entirely unnecessary. The wind was as cross as it could possibly be.

“OK, Two, let’s watch the crosswind,” said Major Langley, and called, “Eagle Lead is turning base, gear down, pressure up, brakes checked.”

“Cleared to land,” the tower operator replied.

Willis reached forward with his left glove and slammed the landing gear lever to DOWN. OK, OK, he thought, this will be no problem. I’ll just keep the right wing way down through the round-about, touch on the right wheel, and follow through with plenty of rudder. Plenty of rudder.

He turned toward the runway, and pressed the microphone button. Haven’t run off a runway yet, and I don’t intend to do it today. “Eagle Two is turning base …” The right main gear indicator, the green light that should have been shining, was out. Left main was locked down, nosegear was locked down. But the right main gear was still retracted. The red warning light in the transparent plastic landing gear handle was shining, and the squeal of the gear unsafe warning horn filled the cockpit. He heard the horn in his own earphones as he held the microphone button down. On their radios, the tower operators would hear the horn. He lifted his thumb, then pressed it down again. “Eagle Two is going to make a low approach; requests a gear check by mobile control.”

An odd feeling, to have something wrong with the airplane. The landing gear usually works so well. He leveled at one hundred feet over the runway and flew past the miniature glass tower. The mobile control officer stood outside, in the blowing waves of autumn grass. Willis watched him for a second as he passed. The mobile control officer was not using binoculars. Then he was gone, and the solitary F-84 whipped over the far end of the runway, above Eagle Lead, safely on the ground.

“Your right main gear is up and locked,” the voice came flatly from mobile control.

“Roj. I’ll cycle the gear.” Willis was pleased with his voice. He climbed slowly to one thousand feet, raised the landing gear, and lowered it again. The right main “safe” light remained stubbornly out, and the warning light in the plastic handle persisted redly. Another fifteen minutes of fuel. Four times Willis recycled the landing gear, and four times the right main gear indicated unsafe. He pulled the handle out a half inch and pressed it to EMERG DOWN. There was a faint click from the right, but the condition was the same. He was concerned. There was no time for the fire trucks to lay a strip of foam down the runway, if he was forced to land with the right gear still locked up. To land with it up on a hard dry runway, crosswind, would be inviting an end-over-end cartwheeling crash as soon as the unwheeled wing touched the concrete. The only alternative was bailout. Here’s a decision for you, he thought. And irrationally: one more flyby, maybe the gear is down now.

“It’s still up,” the mobile control officer said, before Willis had even flown by the miniature tower. The grass was waving greenly, briskly, and he noticed suddenly at the edge of the runway a small gray dot. With a shock of surprise, he realized that it was a cat. Heinz’s lucky cat, he thought, and for no reason he smiled under his oxygen mask. He felt better. And a thought came from nowhere.

“Tower, Eagle Two is declaring an emergency. I’m going to make one more pass around; try to bounce on the left gear to knock the right one down.”

“Understand you are declaring an emergency,” the tower replied. The tower was primarily concerned with meeting its responsibility, which was to ring the bell that sent crash crews scrambling for the red trucks. Responsibility met, the tower became only an interested observer, and very little help.

Jack Willis, oddly, felt like a new person, enormously confident. The bounce on a left wheel in a strong right crosswind was a trick of coordination reserved for thousand-hour pilots, and Willis had just over four hundred hours in the air, sixty-eight in the F-84.

Those who watched the next approach called it the work of an old-time professional pilot. With left wing down, with hard right rudder, with controls only moderately responsive at landing airspeed, Second Lieutenant Jack Willis bounced his twenty-thousand-pound airplane six times on its left main landing gear. On the sixth bounce, the right gear swung suddenly down and locked into place. The third green light came on.

The crosswind landing that followed was simple by comparison, and his airplane touched smoothly down on its right wheel, then its left, and last of all, the nosewheel. Full left rudder in the landing roll and a touch of left brake as the airplane slowed and tried to weathervane into the wind, and the emergency was over. The crash crews in their bulky white suits of asbestos were unnecessary and out of their element in the normalcy that followed. “Nice job, Eagle Two,” mobile said simply. And the gray Persian cat, that had watched the landing with uncatlike, one might almost say, professional interest, was gone. The 167th Tactical Fighter Squadron was gradually pulling itself into fighting shape.

The winter came. Low clouds moved in from the sea to become a permanent companion of the hilltops that surrounded the airbase. It rained much, and as the winter wore on, the rain became freezing rain and then snow. The runway was icy and drag chutes and very careful braking were necessary to keep the heavy airplanes on the concrete. The tall emerald grass turned pallid and lifeless. But a fighter squadron does not cancel its mission each winter, there is always flying and training to be done. There were incidents as the new pilots were faced with unusual aircraft problems and low ceilings, but they had been trained well on instruments and somehow the gray Persian cat sat carefully at the edge of the runway as each of the afflicted airplanes landed. The Persian became known to the pilots simply as “Cat.”

One freezing afternoon, just as Wally Jacobs touched down uneventfully after a hydraulic system failure and a no-flap, no-speedbrake approach through a five-hundred-foot ceiling, Captain Hendrick, on duty as mobile control officer, ventured to capture the cat. It sat quietly, looking down the runway, absorbed in watching Jacobs’s airplane after it whistled past. Hendrick approached from behind and gently lifted the cat from the ground. At his first touch it became a ball of gray lightning. There was an instant slash of claw along Hendrick’s cheek, and the Persian streaked to the ground and away, disappearing at once in the tall dry grass.

Five seconds later the brakes on Wally Jacobs’s airplane failed completely, and he swerved off the runway at seventy knots into the not-quite-frozen dirt. The nosewheel strut sheared immediately. The airplane disappeared in a great sheet of flying mud, slewed to collapse the right main landing gear and split the droptank, and slid around, backward, for another two hundred feet. Jacobs left the cockpit at once, forgetting even to close the throttle. In a second, as Hendrick watched, the airplane burst into brilliant flame. It burned fiercely, and with the airplane was destroyed a record for flying safety unmatched by any other fighter squadron in Europe.

The findings of the investigation were that Lieutenant Jacobs was at fault for allowing the airplane to leave the runway and for neglecting to close the throttle, allowing the still-turning engine to ignite the fire. If he had not forgotten, like a grossly inexperienced pilot, to stopcock the throttle, the airplane would have been able to fly again.

The board’s decision was not a popular one with the 167th Tactical Fighter Squadron, but the cause of the destruction of the airplane was laid to pilot error. Hendrick mentioned the cat, and an order, unwritten but official, was sent through the squadron: the Persian was never to be approached again. From that moment, Cat was rarely mentioned.

But once in a while, as a young lieutenant brought an ailing airplane down through the weather, he would ask of mobile control, “Cat there?” And the mobile control officer would scan the runway edge for the sculptured gray Persian, and he would pick up his microphone and say, “He’s there.” And the airplane would land.

Winter wore on. The young pilots became older, absorbed experience. And as the weeks went by, Cat was seen less and less frequently at the edge of the runway. Norm Thompson brought in an airplane with the windscreen and canopy completely iced over. Cat was not waiting by the runway, but Thompson’s GCA was a professional one, born of training and experience. He made a blind touchdown, jettisoned the canopy to be able to see, and rolled to an uneventful stop. Jack Willis, now with one hundred thirty hours flying experience in the F-84, came back with an airplane heavily damaged by ricochets picked up after a firing run at a new strafing range laid over a base of solid rock. He landed smoothly, although Cat was nowhere to be seen.

The last time Cat appeared by the runway was in March. It was Jacobs again. He called that his oil pressure was falling, and that he was trying to make it back to the field. The ceiling was high, three thousand feet, when he broke into the clear after a radar vector and called the runway in sight.

Major Robert Rider had raced his staff car to mobile control as the notice of emergency in progress reached him. This is it, he thought. I’m going to see Jacobs die. He closed the glass door behind him as the pilot asked, “Cat happen to be down there?”

Rider reached for the binoculars and scanned the edge of the runway. The Persian sat quietly waiting. “Cat’s here,” the squadron commander told the mobile control officer seriously, and seriously the information was relayed to Jacobs.

“Oil pressure zero,” the pilot said matter-of-factly. Then, “Engine’s frozen, the stick is locking. I’ll try to make it on the emergency hydraulic pump.” A moment later he said, suddenly, “No I won’t. I’m getting out.” He turned his airplane toward the heavy forest to the west and ejected. Two minutes later he was sprawling in the frozen mud of a plowed French field, his parachute settling like a tired white butterfly about him. It was over that quickly.

The investigation board was to find later that the airplane struck the ground with both hydraulic systems completely locked. The emergency hydraulic pump failed before impact, they discovered, and the airplane hit with controls frozen and immovable. Jacobs was later to be commended for his judgment in not attempting to land the stricken airplane.

But that was to be later. As Jacobs’s parachute drifted down behind a low hill, Rider leveled the binoculars at the gray Persian, who stood suddenly and stretched luxuriously, claws digging into the frozen earth. Cat, he noticed, was not a perfect sculpture. Along his left side, from ribs to shoulder, ran a wide white scar that the battle-gray fur could not cover as he stretched. The graceful head turned as Rider watched, and the amber eyes gazed squarely at the commander of the 167th Tactical Fighter Squadron.

The cat blinked once, slowly, one might almost say amusedly, and walked to disappear for the last time in the tall grass.