# GRAMPAW PETTIBONE

## Dear Gramp:

I recently pulled a big goof and because I wonder if it could happen to anyone else, I'm sending it to you for whatever disposition you think is pertinent.

I departed Sioux Falls for Great Falls flying an F9F-6 on an IFR clearance. No particular sweat involved. Cumulus buildups in Great Falls with broken decks and overcasts from the ground up. At Miles City I requested and got 1000' on top to replace the 35,000 I had been at, putting me at 43,500.

Five minutes prior to my ETA at Lewiston I received the following clearance: "After passing Lewiston, descend to 18,000. Report passing through 35,000 on this frequency, report passing through 30,000 on 257.8 to ATC and report passing through 25,000 to Great Falls tower. Cruise and maintain 18,000 until passing Great Falls radio. Cleared for a standard jet penetration approach after passing Great Falls."

Again, no perspiration involved. HOWEVER, during all of this I passed Lewiston. I was busy riding gauges, copying a clearance, reading it back, etc., etc. I checked my kneepad and the map on my lap and both agreed that *317* was the frequency of Great Falls. I had the RAFACS lying open on the port console and it *seemed* to agree that 317 was it. I TUNED to 317, heard the station, DIDN'T CHECK FOR AN IDENTIFICATION (busy, you see), turned the volume down and went on transacting business with ATC. Darned near was the last business I ever transacted, too.

It seems that the frequencies of Great Falls and Helena had been swapped. Great Falls is now *371*, rather than *317*. It took only about 10-12 degrees of course change to head for Helena from Lewiston in lieu of Great Falls, and when I checked the RAFACS the transposition of two numbers (*371*, rather than *317*) simply didn't penetrate. Anyway, I DID A PENETRATION LETDOWN ON HELENA COMPLETELY


UNDER THE IMPRESSION I WAS GOING TO BREAK OUT AT GREAT FALLS. If you look at the terrain maps of the two fields, you too may wake up screaming as I am still doing. I refueled and proceeded on to my home base without ever seeing Great Falls.

Basically, the fault here is so simple, it's insulting to the average aviator to state it—*check the range station identification.* Alibis regarding mistakes in charts (mine was over a year old) and the change in frequencies (made almost two years ago, I think) don't do a bit of good where a dead pilot and a scattered airplane are concerned. There's another thing involved here: Don't get—or allow yourself to think you are—too busy to apply simple good pilotage procedures to any and all flights.

I still think it was poor judgment to swap these two frequencies within 70 miles of each other. Had the RAFACS shown Great Falls to be something like 257 or 369, the difference would have been obvious. But 317 versus 371. . . .


Go ahead and baste me. The things I've said to myself concerning this matter have me completely done on one side. I'll turn over and you can have at the other side, so I can get well done all over, but I'll make you a small bet I'll never ever again get so "busy" I don't check identification and recheck frequencies.

When I broke out at Helena (I didn't know what it was at the time), I had 1400 pounds of fuel left and a short but usable field under me, so I made a carrier approach and had no trouble getting in. But 5000 feet isn't the most comfortable length when the field elevation is 3800. Getting off was simple enough since I left at 0430 the next morning when it was still cool. But before that field came in sight and while I had a mental picture of bellying that thing in someplace, I distinctly remember thinking: "Won't Gramps have a ball with this one?"

CDR, USNR-R

*Grampaw Pettibone Says:*

Thanks for the invitation to the ball, but I believe I'll just sit out this one. My knees feel a little weak.

The above account came from an experienced pilot, one who served as both XO and CO of jet squadrons during the Korean conflict. And the way he tells it, it *could* happen to someone else—but the next goofer might not get away with it.

My own system for insuring that I have the correct frequency of a navigational aid is *never* to use the information published on the aeronautical charts except as a *very last* resort. No need to use old information when the correct and current dope is available in the *latest* RAFACS and other appropriate publications. If this pilot had used the *Radio Facility Charts* for filling in the pertinent poop on his kneepad prior to the flight, he would probably have used the correct frequency of 371 for Great Falls. True, he might never have discovered that the

317 on the aeronautical chart was no longer correct—but in this case, what he didn't know wouldn't hurt him.

## Tagged Out at Home

The pilot of an F9F-5 filing for the final leg of an extended cross country flight learned that current weather at his destination was 100 feet obscured, visibility three-fourths mile with fog. Since a near zero-zero condition was forecast for the pilot's estimated time of arrival, he changed his destination to Langley AFB, but told the forecaster that he would check the weather in flight and would change back to his original destination (home base) if conditions improved.

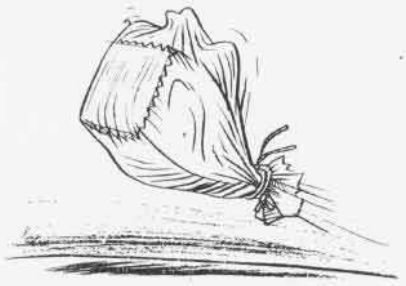
At 0300 (EST), when 24 minutes out, he requested home base weather and was given a 300-foot ceiling and one and a half miles visibility with light rain and fog, whereupon he changed his destination to his home base. Eight minutes prior to his arrival, he contacted approach control and learned that his change of destination had not yet been received and that GCA was on 30-minute standby. Continuing on to the homer, he arrived on schedule at 39,000 feet with a reported 50 minutes of fuel remaining.

The pilot stated he could not wait for GCA and was cleared for a penetration and approach at his own discretion. During the penetration turn, the local weather was given to him as 200 obscured, one and one fourth with rain and fog. When asked whether he would have enough fuel to go to his alternate if he missed the field on his low approach, the pilot reported that it would be touch and go.

He was given the weather at two alternate fields (one with a 10,000-foot ceiling and four miles in haze) and, in order to expedite an on-course clearance, was asked to which he would like to go in case he missed the approach. "I'll let you know in a minute," was his last transmission. In level flight, the aircraft started clipping off treetops and then came to rest inverted some six miles from the home field. Death was instantaneous.

The pilot had the reputation of being an excellent jet instrument pilot. He had more than 2,000 flight hours and had flown 120 hours in the last six months including 19 hours of actual instruments.

He had taken off from NAS DENVER at 1755 (MST) after having slept for one and a half hours during the afternoon. His point of first intended landing was Lambert Field, but owing to a holding delay at St. Louis, he changed his destination to NAS OLATHE where he let down and then flew VFR to land at Grandview (Mo.) AFB at 2117 (CST). He departed Grandview for the east coast at 0010C and crashed



near his home base at 0342 (EST). Since leaving Denver, he had been airborne almost five hours of which at least four hours were flown in darkness and on instruments.

The accident board felt that the pilot descended knowingly to an extremely low level to gain visual contact and while flying—either visually or on instruments—in darkness, rain, and fog inadvertently collided with the treetops.

Following the crash it was discovered that the radio altimeter was set on the low scale but *the radio altimeter was not turned on.* Examination of the pilot's flight planning log showed that he didn't complete his planning to Langley, the destination listed on his flight plan.

*Grampaw Pettibone Says:*

**The evidence indicates that this lad never intended to go to the base for which he filed. There's no doubt about his being a capable gent with plenty of confidence built on experience. After all, it's not every Tom, Dick and Harry who chooses to spend most of the night flying instruments from Denver to the east coast.**

**Maybe that was his trouble—overconfidence that blinded him to the limitations of man and flying machine.**

**In spite of familiarity with the area and confidence in your own ability, trying to get home using just your 20-20 eyeballs when the field's below GCA minimums just ain't smart. This is a case where foresight's better than eyesight—or hindsight from six feet under the sod. It makes me mad!**


## Old Stick-in-the-Mud

Three HOK-1 aircraft had completed the first two legs of their ferry trip when the lead pilot made a precautionary landing to determine the cause of a strange smell (suspected smoke). The remainder of the flight landed beside him to give assistance if needed. After the leader decided to continue the flight, he was advised by the plane captain that the helicopter had settled into the soft ground. Both wheels on the right side had sunk approximately five to six inches below the surface, but the pilot decided that it would be a simple matter to pick the aircraft up and proceed.

When take-off was attempted, the helicopter started to tilt to the left, so collective pitch was reduced. The pilot then made a second take-off attempt, using more collective pitch and right cyclic to overcome the tilting tendency. The helicopter tipped further to the left and the left rotor touched the ground. The HOK set up a severe vibration, and the pilot shut down to survey the damage.

*Grampaw Pettibone Says:*

Looks to me like this gent had plenty of warning of events to come but didn't believe in signs and was too eager to get on with the flight. For the price of the few minutes required to wheel himself onto firmer ground—and he had the crews of three helicopters to help him—he could have saved his aircraft.

The pilot thought the accident could have been prevented if he had locked the nose wheels prior to landing, believing that if they had been straight instead of swiveled the aircraft would have lifted off easily. Mebbe yes, mebbe no. The accident board did recommend locked nosegear for rough terrain landings, but felt that the pilot erred in not making certain the aircraft was free of the soft ground before making the first take-off attempt and that before making the second try he durned well should have been positive that he was really unstuck.