GRAMPAW PETTIBONE

Splat

It was a dark and stormy night aboard the large CVA deployed to the northern oceans. The weather was about 800 feet, broken clouds, the wind was blowing hard and there was a moderate to heavy swell. The moon had not yet risen as the F-4B *Phantom II* came down the pipe in the soup from marshal.

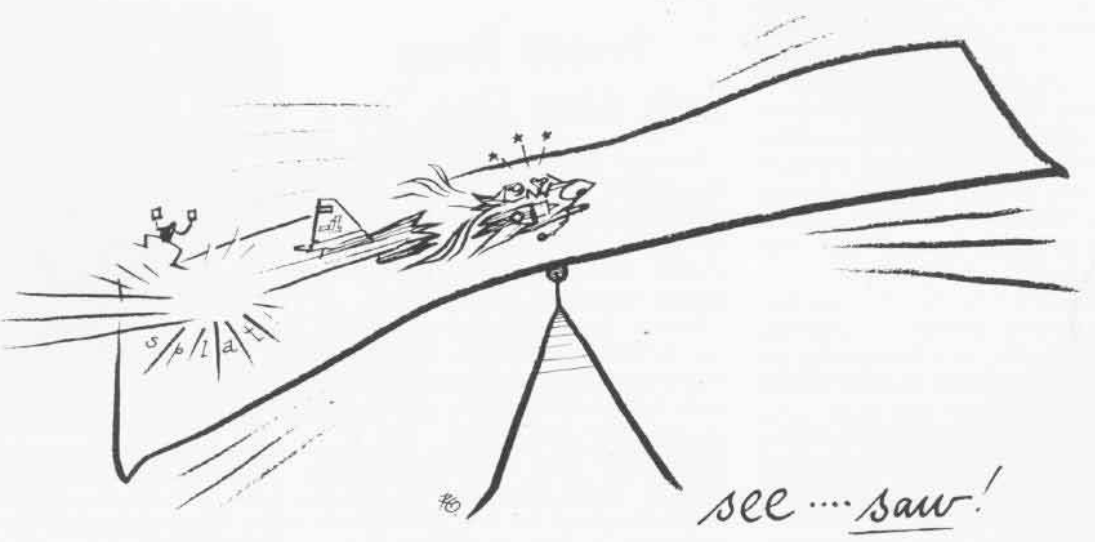
The lieutenant junior grade pilot steadied down as best he could, but received a wave-off from the LSO because of an excessively pitching deck. The *Phantom* entered the night bolter pattern and CCA directed it onto glide path. The pilot acquired the meatball at about one mile with a fuel state of 4,400 pounds. Coming closer to the ship, he could see that the deck was pitching more than expected. The Fresnel lens was unusable in close because the meatball was going off the top and off the bottom. Paddles made his first advisory call, "A little low." The pilot added some power and checked his sink rate. The LSO advised he was looking good, that the deck was pitching and to hold what he had. The next call was "going a little high" and the final call was for attitude. No power or wave-off calls were given.

The *Phantom* hit the deck in nearly a three-point attitude and engaged the #4 wire. The nose gear began to collapse immediately and the force of the landing broke the back of the airplane, allowing the nose to fall forward and the tail to fall back to the deck. The crippled F-4 slid to a stop, burning fiercely. The pilot was stunned, and when he tried to bring the throttles back, he found they were stuck and he couldn't secure the engines. The radar intercept operator thought they had just made a pretty hard landing and didn't realize anything was wrong until he saw, in his rear view mirror, flames coming out directly behind the canopy. He then realized the danger and quickly left the aircraft. The pilot, still stunned (and with a spinal compression injury), was assisted in his egress by flight deck personnel.

The fire was quickly extinguished by the deck crew; however, the poor *Phantom* was a complete loss.

Grampaw Pettibone says:

Holy mackerel! Wha' happened? Sure glad they caught a wire. The LSO said the pilot "went for" the pitching deck, which was going down, then started up at the last second. That made the accident primarily pilot error, but the real question is, "Why was a nugget pilot set up for this accident by the boss in the first place?" The manual meatball should have been in use. The plane should have been diverted to a nearby shore field. But here's the clincher, the LSO thought it was the C.O. in the plane, and of course he coulda' hacked it. Wish we could stop makin' piles of junk outta' these expensive airplanes.



ILLUSTRATED BY Osborn

Will the Real Airfield Speak Up

The F-4J squadron commanding officer briefed his wingman and the RIO's for a night section, combat air patrol mission from the CVA in the eastern Mediterranean. Aircraft were manned at 1700 for a 1730 launch. All went well except that the wingman's plane seemed to have a scratchy UHF transmitter.

At about 1750, the ship requested that they proceed toward the primary divert airfield to check the navaids and the weather. The C.O. did, approaching to about 50 miles. The Tacan checked and the tower relayed the weather. The flight immediately switched back to the ship's frequency and advised that the divert field was VFR with a 30,000-foot thin cirrus layer and seven miles' visibility.

The recovery started normally with the C.O. calling the ball shortly after 1900 with 4,800 pounds. Just before touchdown, he received a foul deck wave-off and started around the bolter pattern. Ship's personnel had discovered that the #1 cross deck pendant had broken wires and the #2 arresting engine had a major hydraulic leak. Because of the time needed to make repairs, it was decided to divert the *Phantoms*. By this time, the second F-4 had been waved off and the C.O. was back at the 45° position. "Your signal bingo, the airfield bears 125° at 115 miles." The two planes headed for land individually.

At about 80 miles out from the ship, the C.O. switched to the airfield Tacan station, but the needle and DME would only spin. When he called approach control, he received no response, and the tower didn't respond either.

The C.O. crossed the beach line and began flying a search pattern up and down the coast, slowly letting down. He had no success on any frequency or guard channel, nor could he get anything but the ship on Tacan. As he continued the search pattern and let down slowly to 5,000 feet, he could make out the coastline but could not find any lighted airfield. Occasionally he heard a weak call from the wingman who was having the same problems. With 400 pounds of fuel remaining, he heard a weak transmission from the wingman, "We have touched down." The C.O. called for a short count, but heard no more. It was later learned that the wingman had found the unlighted airfield and landed – shutting down his engines for fear of going off the end of an unknown runway.

The C.O. then told his RIO to stow his equipment and get ready to eject. With 200 pounds of fuel remaining, the pilot saw the lights of the runway come on and the tower broadcast the statement, "It is good for landing." They were, however, still some ten miles east of the field, and as the fuel gauge reached 100 pounds, the engines flamed out. The RIO immediately ejected – on the advice of the C.O. who followed right behind.

Uninjured, they were picked up shortly by military personnel of their host country.

Grampaw Pettibone says:

Sufferin' catfish! How about them apples? This accident was the most confused comedy of small errors by so many people that it would (and did) take a whole book to explain it. Suffice it to say that the foreign military airfield personnel never received the request from the U.S. Navy to be open for divert aircraft from the carrier. They had dutifully shut off the Tacan, radios and lights and had gone home for the evening when it got dark – shortly after the F-4's had called for the weather. The C.O. hadn't checked with them to see if they were planning to remain open.

When the base commander and his people heard the distressed *Phantom* flying overhead, they made a mad scramble to get the lights on and their radios manned but were just a few minutes too late. Some days you just can't seem to make a nickel.

Memo from Gramps: IF

If every component put on an airplane would function all of the time as it was designed; if we could maintain an airplane to absolute perfection; if the weather were CAVU every day; if pilots and crew members never made a bad decision or mistake, we wouldn't have any more accidents and Ol' Gramps could retire to the country. Unfortunately, these *if's* are still *if's*.

To prevent the emergency conditions that are going to occur from becoming accidents and to reduce those bad decisions and mistakes made by air crews to a minimum are the goals of Aviation Safety. They can be reached, *if* every aviator and every aircrewman approaches his job as a true professional, with pride in his work and the determination to do his very best.