GRAMPAW PETTIBONE

Safety Pilot?

A young aviator with approximately 800 hours was scheduled for a low-level navigation exercise flight consisting of two A-4 *Skyhawks*. The pilot was assigned as safety pilot and observer flying in the chase position. Briefing by the other pilot, who was to be the flight leader, began an hour before taxi time. Both pilots were familiar with the route, having flown it the previous day. Included in the brief were launch procedures, route details, target contact procedures during the last leg of the route, and fuel usage figures.

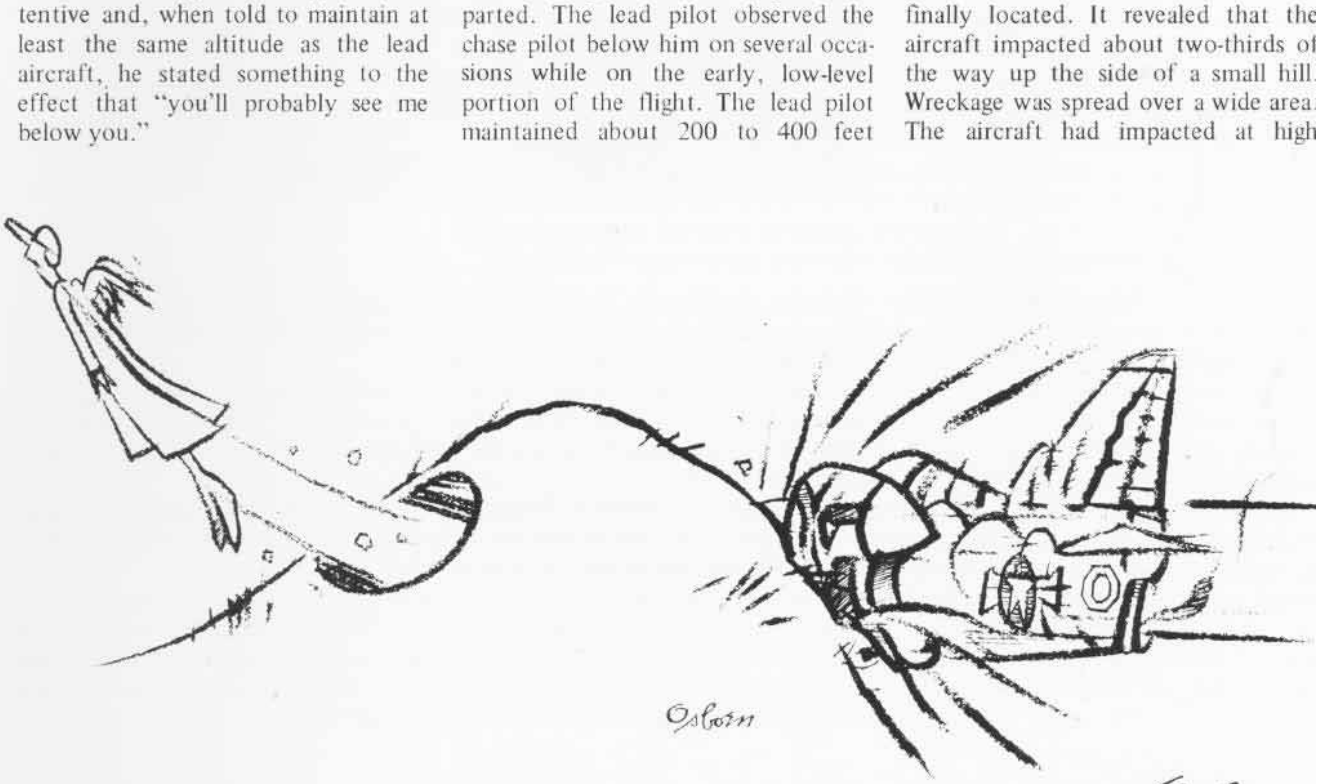
The chase pilot was instructed to keep the lead pilot in sight at all times and let the lead pilot do all the navigation. Most importantly, chase was to ensure the safety of the flight. In the event of lost communications, the instructions were to get the attention of the other pilot with appropriate signals and to climb. During the brief, the young aviator appeared attentive and, when told to maintain at least the same altitude as the lead aircraft, he stated something to the effect that "you'll probably see me below you."

Following the brief, the pilots departed. The lead pilot observed the chase pilot below him on several occasions while on the early, low-level portion of the flight. The lead pilot maintained about 200 to 400 feet above the terrain during the route. A one of the checkpoints, the lead pilot's radio transmission was acknowledged by the chase pilot, but there was no visual sighting by the lead pilot. The absence of the chase pilot was first noticed six minutes later, at the next checkpoint, when there was no acknowledgment of the lead pilot's radio transmission. The lead pilot continued along the route, attempting to contact the chase pilot on tactical, tower and target frequencies.

After no contact, the lead pilot climbed in an attempt to gain visual or radio contact. Radio transmissions on guard frequency were made without success. The lead pilot then began retracing the route while again contacting the tower to ascertain if the chase pilot had checked into the area.

SAR assistance was requested and two TA-4F *Skyhawks* were launched to aid in the effort. A SAR helo from a nearby field also searched along the low-level route.

Crash site of the chase aircraft was finally located. It revealed that the aircraft impacted about two-thirds of the way up the side of a small hill. Wreckage was spread over a wide area. The aircraft had impacted at high



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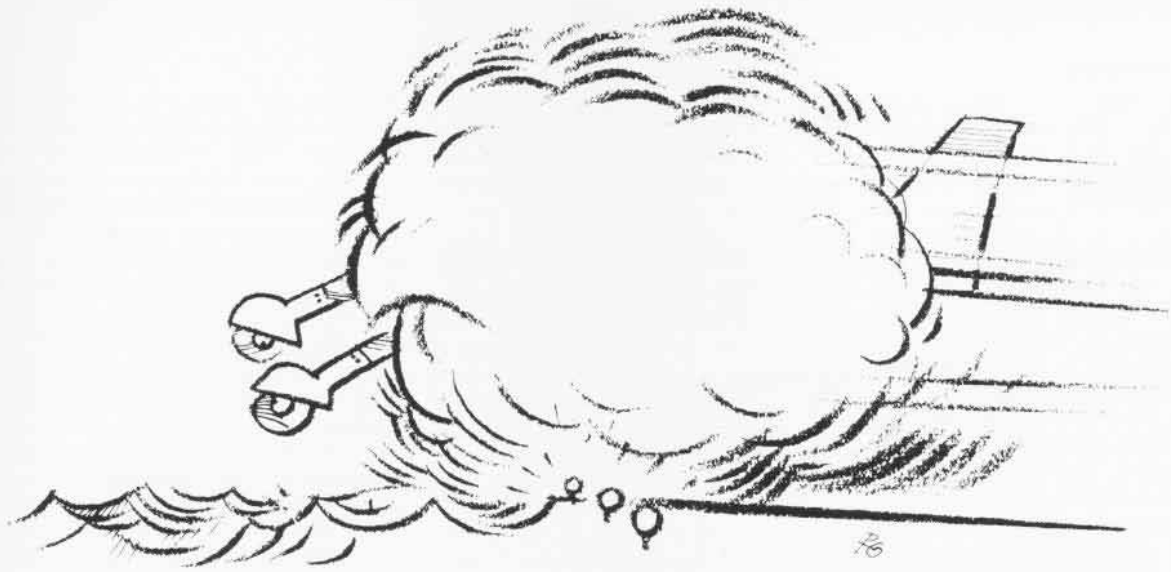

speed in a slightly nose-up attitude. There was no ejection attempt. The pilot was killed instantly.

Grampaw Pettibone says:

Sufferin' catfish! It's amazin' how much we find out about some of our drivers – too late! This throttle jockey had a history of flyin' low. The wreckage got a thorough going over and not a darn thing was found to indicate mechanical problems. Kind'a clear what took place – pilot flew low and ran into a hill!

This gent had been flying with more than one squadron. In one of the squadrons, some were aware of his "lack of sound judgment" and he was scheduled accordingly.

I believe, if I were a C.O. reading this, I would take a close look at the pilots flying my machines, but not attached to my unit – nuff sed!

Nostalgia

As an AF-1E (FJ-4B) pilot took off on a VFR night cross-country flight, the weather at his destination, which was also home base, was clear with three miles visibility in smoke and haze. En route, he received current weather broadcasts and found no change at all. Not a cloud in the sky, just some smoke and haze to cut down the visibility a bit.

He started a gentle letdown about 20 miles out and soon had the lighted field in sight. Orbiting overhead at 2,500 feet, he could plainly see the entire airfield and the neighboring areas but was informed by the tower that the field was IFR with ½-mile visibility and that he would have to contact approach control for a GCA landing.

Proceeding to a radio beacon some eight miles from the field and orbiting there, he had no success in contacting approach control. He finally got a clearance using the control tower as a relay. All this time he had the airfield in sight. It didn't seem possible the field had only ½-mile visibility. It was a real puzzler.

After being assigned a GCA frequency, he made contact immediately and was given a vector for a dogleg approach to the runway. GCA cleared him down to 1,000 feet, had him dirty up for landing and informed him the arresting gear was not rigged for this runway. The wind was calm, and visibility was now ¼ mile and deteriorating rapidly. The pilot rogered, said he had the field in sight and shortly after this touched down right on the centerline, but just a little fast and about 500 feet past the normal GCA touchdown point. He had about 5,500 feet of runway remaining for the rollout.

The pilot had the sensation of being in a ball of cotton. Only the runway lights to either side of him were dimly visible. Visibility ahead was absolutely zero! He braked as hard as he felt he could do safely for what seemed an endless time. Suddenly the threshold lights on the bitter end loomed up close ahead! Shutting the engine down, he jammed both feet hard on the brakes, heard the right tire blow and then hurtled off the end into the shallow waters of the bay which virtually surrounds the airfield. He had about 50 knots when he hit the water and went some distance out before stopping.

His radio was still running, for he heard GCA calling him, so he answered up, saying he was in the water, not injured, but to come quickly.

The first man on the scene was the pilot's GCA final controller who illuminated the wreck with his truck's headlights, then waded out and assisted him into shore.

Grampaw Pettibone says:

Sufferin' catfish! There's nothing more treacherous than ground fog, for it usually suckers you in with an apparently good view of the runway and surrounding area and then smothers you in a white blanket right at flare or touchdown points. And that landing roll-out can be sheer horror, kind'a like fallin' into quicksand!

Once you touch down and that old fuel state forbids any further excursions into the blue, you've pretty well had it. The only solution is to go to an alternate before trying a letdown and while fuel permits. When temperature and dewpoint are hangin' close together and the wind is calm, you can expect ground fog, especially in coastal areas, and plan accordingly. There's more to a weather broadcast than just ceiling and vis. (March 1963)