grampaw pettibone

A Bad Flap

A pilot was scheduled for some shore-based catapult flights in an F-4 *Phantom*. He had considerable experience with over 2,000 total hours and approximately 1,000 in the *Phantom*. He had an enlisted man in the back seat during this evolution.

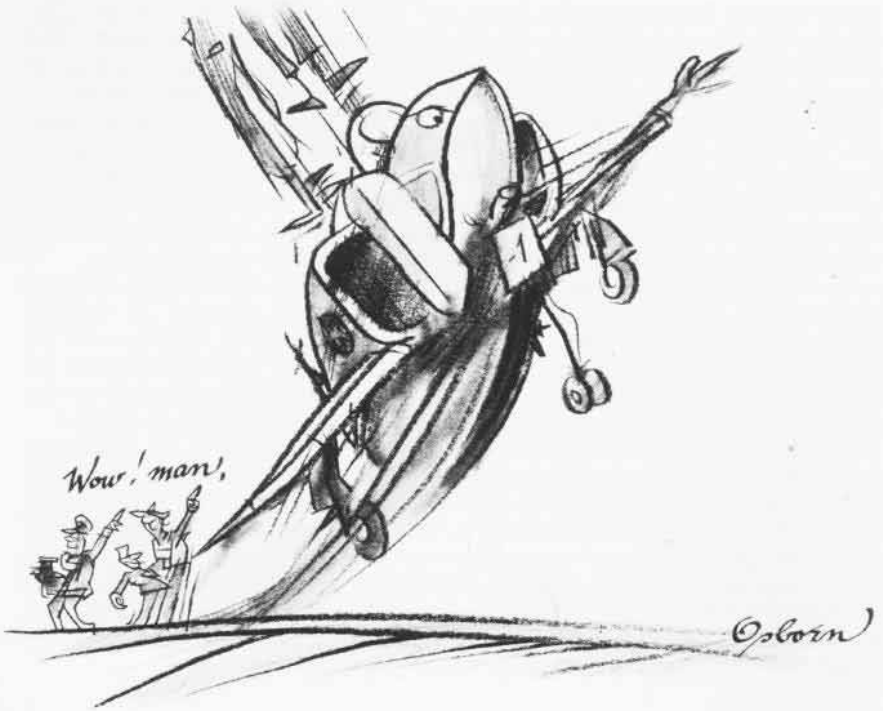
The aircraft's weight was to be 56,000 pounds with full flaps for the catapult launch. Preflight and start procedures were normal in all respects. The taxi distance to the catapult was very short, about 250 feet. During the taxi, the pilot performed fuel system checks and completed the takeoff checklist.

The pilot later stated that flaps were selected and indicated full down. With one exception, all observing catapult personnel stated that either the flaps were down or were not observed. The man attaching the holdback fitting said that the flaps were up but that he had no reason to believe that this

was not the desired flap position. Later examination of films, which were taken of the flight, confirmed that the flaps were up. The pilot set longitudinal trim setting and held the stabilator in position in accordance with Natops.

Upon signal, the catapult fired. The *Phantom* achieved the predicted end speed. At the end of the catapult stroke, the F-4 pitched up rapidly to a nose-high attitude, apparently becoming airborne in ground effect. It also started rolling right. The pilot attempted to counter the roll by applying increasing left aileron and then rudder. The aircraft continued to roll right with full left aileron and rudder applied. In view of the "extremis" position, the pilot initiated command ejection with the secondary handle.

The conditions at ejection were 30 feet altitude, 20 degrees right wing down and 40 degrees nose up. Ejection equipment operated as advertised with both crew members landing near the launch site. There were no major injuries; however, the enlisted passenger sustained minor bruises. The aircraft continued briefly after ejection, reached a peak altitude of 200 feet and crashed in a wooded area one-half mile from the launch site. It was a total loss.



Grampaw Pettibone says:

Holy Hannah! I have never seen a more screwed up mess than this operation. These machines do not fly well when the end speed calls for a flaps-down configuration and the flaps are actually up! There were many personnel involved who didn't understand their duties during this sequence—the plane captain was not F-4 qualified, the catapult officer had no previous F-4 launches and was not being supervised by a qualified F-4 launching officer, the aircraft inspector was to check the flap position prior to launch (he didn't know that!), etc.

This looks like a poorly planned, poorly briefed episode which ended in the needless loss of an aircraft. This doesn't excuse the pilot. He committed the first big error when he didn't put down his flaps. But, he sure didn't get help from the others.

ILLUSTRATED BY Osborn

Death Wish

The CV was in the process of requalifying and refreshing air wing pilots. During the at-sea period, deck time was allotted to qualify several visiting RF-4B pilots. For the *Phantom* drivers, it would be their first try at night carrier landings. It was dark, with no moon, and a relatively steady deck.

One pilot was consistently settling in close, requiring power calls to get aboard. After a trap and a waveoff, the pilot again began to settle in the middle. The LSO called, "You're low." The pilot added power but attempted to hold the ball up with his nose, causing the *Phantom* to decelerate. At the in-close position, he was still slightly low and slow. A power call was given, followed by another. The air wing LSO hit the pickle and the waveoff light illuminated. The controlling LSO was screaming for power as all but the green approach light on the plane disappeared below the rounddown. The LSO's radio was dead and so, but for inches, was the pilot. Somehow he was able to keep it flying.

Grampaw Pettibone says:

Holy smokes! This incident was passed to me by a young aviator in the squadron. The lad went on to say, "Working aircraft too close when they are not set up is unwise. They should be waved off early enough to avoid situations like this one. However, the pilot who depends on a power call to keep him off the ramp may well remember that there are no radios installed in the net."

Those words are so good to my ears, I believe I might recommend this lad as my relief.

Sad Story

An A-4B departed a naval air station for what should have been a routine cross-country training flight. The flight had been requested, approved, briefed, planned and filed as an IFR cross-country training flight to a midwest NAS. The pilot was cleared IFR at 31,000 feet, but very shortly after takeoff he cancelled his IFR, reporting that he had a compass malfunction and would proceed VFR. Approximately one hour later he requested and received a change of flight plan to an Air Force base over 900 miles away and filed for an en route time of 2+00 hours with 2+30 hours of fuel remaining.

There was no further communication between the pilot and control agencies for the next hour and 20 minutes. Then he requested the winds at 35,000 and 40,000 feet.

Approximately 2+30 hours after refiling in the air, the pilot contacted the control tower at the destination field and informed them he was 15 miles out and requested landing instructions. He also reported fluctuating fuel pressure and requested the status of the Vortac serving the field. The tower advised him that the Vortac was down for maintenance and that a Notam stating it would be out of service was sent the day before. The pilot then requested a DF steer and the tower controller gave him a heading to the field.

Some 10 minutes after initial contact with the Air Force tower, the pilot reported a flameout and indicated he would not be able to make the field. The tower informed him that there were no auxiliary fields near his position and that the bailout ejection area was ten miles northeast. At this time the pilot informed the tower that he was passing through 9,000 feet. A short time later the aircraft crashed in the desert nine miles east of the AFB. The pilot ejected at an estimated altitude of little more than ten feet above the ground and was fatally injured.

Grampaw Pettibone says:

Great balls of fire, what waste! This well-trained and experienced lad made some real bad moves on this flight and, after they accumulated to the point of no return, he made the fatal mistake of staying with the aircraft until he was too low to eject safely.

Most of us have committed errors hard to explain, but this pilot's decisions from takeoff to flameout are beyond reason. Here's a pilot whose demonstrated ability and personal conduct were such that his cross-country request was approved without reservation; yet he cancels his instrument flight plan just after takeoff, proceeds VFR through APC, with insufficient fuel and no notam info, changes his flight plan to a field several hundred miles away and overflies good en route fuel stops trying to make his new destination.

Poor judgment and lack of professionalism were the primary factors in this accident. Several Navy and FAA directives were violated; but neither Natops nor any other publication ever was written to take the place of a pilot's *judgment*. (August 1964)