grampaw pettibone

Low-Level Caper

A Naval Aviator, a replacement pilot (RP) with an A-7E training squadron, was scheduled for his first low-level instructional flight with a qualified instructor flying chase. The RP had considerable experience, with 2,300 total hours and over 500 hours in the *Corsair*.

The briefing began as scheduled and followed the squadron briefing guide. The route of flight, checkpoints, obstructions and related emergencies were all covered. Takeoff took place as scheduled and the flight was proceeding well with the instructor judging the initial part to be above average. The RP remained on track, crossing checkpoints on time, with fuel being consumed as planned.

As he was approaching one of his checkpoints, he verified his track using crossing roads. He could not position himself accurately, however, because of the swampland he was over. He was on track at the last checkpoint and was flying the preplanned heading. Minimum altitude for this leg of the route was 200 feet. He was looking for significant landmarks because the elapsed time for the leg was expiring. There were some towers, one on either side of the track, which were circled in red on his chart. The instructor was flying the prescribed chase position on his right wing, 600-700 feet aft and 200 feet stepped up. Weather was generally good with the visibility in excess of five miles.

At this time, the instructor saw a bend in a road and determined the flight was about one-and-one-half miles left of track. The RP was looking for the towers but did not see them and started to turn on time. After determining the flight's position by checking the area to his right, the instructor looked back to the left and saw the RP hit the top of one of the towers. The RP felt a thump, thought it was a bird strike and started to climb. The *Corsairs* diverted to a nearby airfield where the A-7 was given a slow-flight check. An uneventful arrested landing was made. The aircraft sustained substantial damage requiring more than 1,500 man-hours to repair.

Grampaw Pettibone says:

Great gallopin' ghosts! This one ought to tell us all something—regardless of how much planning and briefing you do, you've still gotta keep your head outa the cockpit. We've been preachin' this for years and it becomes even more important on a low-level flight.

One thing still bothers me. If this gent and the chase pilot couldn't spot the towers and knew they were there—why didn't they climb up until they found themselves again? Obviously, low-level training is necessary. But, bustin' up a machine doin' it ain't!!

Letter to Gramps

Dear Grampaw Pettibone,

A section of A-6s departed NAS Coast on a cross-country, low-level training mission. Forecast weather for the route called for VFR with isolated thunderstorms in the vicinity. The flight progressed uneventfully until the middle of the route when the section was forced to deviate around a thunderstorm cell. The section climbed to an appropriate VFR altitude and hoped to pick up the remainder of the route on the other side of the storm. However, decreasing visibility and ceiling caused the lead aircraft to attempt to remain VFR on top by climbing.

At 12,000 feet it became apparent that the only way to remain VFR was to enter the positive control area (PCA). The wingman reminded lead that a clearance would be required but lead stated that CAVU weather couldn't be more than a few miles ahead. Passing 24,000 feet, the wingman again asked lead to obtain a clearance and was told, "If the flight is not able to descend VFR past the next cloud bank, I'll contact center." Fifteen minutes after entering the PCA, and skimming the cloud tops at 30,300 feet, lead realized that VFR flight would not be possible. He had previously secured his Mode C squawk and asked his wingman to ensure they were squawking standby.

Lead then contacted center, gave his position and requested clearance to FL 310. When center requested his altitude, he reported 17,500 feet. Center then asked lead to squawk Mode C. Lead reported that he was, but his squawk was reported as oper-

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ating intermittently. This time everyone was lucky. Several minutes later the section received a clearance to FL 310 and the rest of the flight proceeded uneventfully.

Grampaw Pettibone says:

Great gallopin' ghosts! This really frosts my pumpkin! Why do we have to put up with these three percenters who obey the rules only when it fits their schedule?

I printed this letter knowin' full well that the majority of people in Naval Aviation *go by the rules.* It's that small percentage we have to watch out for! Sez something about C.O.s knowing their aircrews.

I'm fully aware that this letter lets it all hang out, but before I'm buried under letters, just expend your efforts in preventin' this type of occurrence in your own unit.

Mr. Cool

A Naval Aviator and his Naval Flight Officer were scheduled for a daylight training flight. They were scheduled to depart the aircraft carrier in the evening for a 1.5-hour sortie. The brief, preflight and man-up operation went as scheduled and the crew departed in an F-4 *Phantom* without incident. The pilot was a senior officer with over 5,000 hours total, more than 2,000 in *Phantoms.*

The aircraft climbed to altitude and began conducting a practice air intercept control mission. While proceeding outbound at 11,500 feet and 300 knots, the crew felt and heard a muffled explosion followed by a left yaw. The pilot had begun checking his instruments when he felt the rear canopy and seat leave the aircraft, very shortly after which he was ejected himself.

During the ejection, the pilot felt a flailing sensation and the airstream pulling at his helmet. The seat tumbling and the flailing soon ended and he was sitting in his seat — falling in a stabilized, somewhat upright position. He was concerned about automatic seat separation and considered pulling the harness restraint release. But he decided to wait a little longer. Convinced there was a failure, he pulled the emergency harness release and the seat bucket fell away.

After separating from the seat, the pilot could not find his left riser, the D-ring or the parachute pack where he expected them (on or above his left shoulder).

He then noticed his parachute pack swinging fore and aft around his right leg. He saw only one riser. He pulled it and the parachute pack to his chest. This action created spinning and tumbling so severe that the horizon was no longer discernible.

Placing the parachute pack between his legs and spreading his arms to stabilize himself, he now noted about a foot of white cord coming from the top of the parachute pack. He pulled it. This resulted in the parachute starting to appear. He ripped at the parachute and it freed itself, opening with a severe shock to him.

Once stabilized in his chute, he opened the seat pan and inflated the survival raft. The raft was oscillating which caused a similar effect on him. He pulled the raft up to him which eased the pendulum swinging.

Looking down, he realized water entry would occur soon, so he let the raft fall. The raft lanyard subsequently wrapped around his right foot. As he entered the water, he was dragged face down for a short distance. He rolled over on his back and was able to free his right parachute Koch fitting. The dragging stopped. After freeing the left fitting, he inflated his life preserver with difficulty, holding his breath while searching for the toggles underwater. He then untangled the raft lanyard which was wrapped around his right foot and pulled himself into his raft.

The NFO's ejection was without incident. Both were rescued by helo shortly after water entry.

Grampaw Pettibone says:

Holy Hannah! Talk about problems, this gent had them all, including the unprogrammed ejection. I picked this story, however, for other reasons. Once this pilot was ejected and encountered all those problems with the chute, he displayed a *coolness* which was fantastic. Can you imagine unpackin' your own chute on the way down? Well, he stayed calm and did exactly that. Makes you proud to be part of Naval Aviation. A cool performance by Cdr. Rod Kauber.