Grampaw Pettibone

Booby Trapped

It was a dark night and traffic was pretty well congested over the busy air station. Helicopters were practicing GCAs to a 10,000-foot runway 90 degrees to the wind line. All other traffic was being landed on dual 8,000-foot runways which had a slight downhill slope.

Since there was no-end-of-runway taxiway, all jet traffic which used the whole length of runway on landing rollout was being held on a small stub end of another runway until they could be cleared back downwind on the duty runway to the nearest taxiway, a matter of about 1,000 feet.

An R4Q was cleared to land on the right dual runway, and an F8U on the left dual runway. Three more F8Us were waiting on the stub at the rollout end for clearance to taxi back to the taxiway. The planes were all on primary tower radio frequency and would remain so until clear of the runway. The F8U on landing approach was waved off when the R4Q got in its path, and another F8U called overhead at the break for landing.

The F8U at the break was on ground control frequency. The pilot had been unable to work the tower on tower primary prior to takeoff and had been cleared off on his night hop, utilizing *only* the ground control frequency. As the first F8U in the pattern took wave-off, the three F8Us at the end of the duty runway were cleared to taxi back on the runway to the taxiway. One fighter had its nose gear steering fail. The pilot radioed the tower that he was holding with five feet of his nose sticking out into the duty runway, but he could taxi straight across the runway and hold on the taxi stub between the dual runways until help could be sent out to him. The other two F8Us taxied around him and cleared the runway safely. Meanwhile, the landing F8U

operating on ground control frequency had touched down and was rolling out. Two R5D pilots were also calling the tower on ground control frequency for taxi clearance across the duty runway at the midfield taxiway.

The tower called the disabled F8U and told the pilot it would close the runway after "the plane" rolled out, and taxi him across. The pilot saw an R4Q completing its rollout and starting to turn off the other dual runway, so he called to state he would taxi across and hold. The tower rogered, so he poured the power to it. One third of the way across, the landing F8U plowed into him, driving its nose section right into his plane, hitting it broadside aft of the wing. The plane burst into flames.

The taxiing pilot jumped out and ran to escape the tremendous fire, but the other pilot was trapped in the crushed cockpit, his leg pinned in the wreckage with flames all around.

The crash crew fought heroically to save him, two or three of them protecting the pilot with their bodies and a heavy blanket while foam was sprayed over them all to keep the flames down. After 30 minutes they were finally able to free him, badly burned but alive. He died of his injuries four days later.


Grampaw Pettibone says:

Great balls of fire! This is one of the worst I've run across in many years! The loss of this fine young man was so needless that it's appalling. The pilot had accepted an F8U for a night hop knowing it had a radio incapable of operating on tower frequency! This same gripe appeared on five successive yellow sheets preceding the fatal flight, yet the plane was considered in an up status!

The tower cleared him on this hop on ground control frequency, knowing he had a radio inoperative on tower frequency. The tower cleared a plane to land with three aircraft sitting like bowling pins on the duty runway's upwind end. The tower had not received an "all clear" from the planes cleared to taxi downwind on the duty runway just a few moments before.

As usual in such unnecessary tragedies, many errors had to be committed to set the stage for this one. It behooves every operations officer, whether he is assigned to a station or squadron, to look over his outfit to see if such booby traps exist for the unwary pilot.

(Reprint from *NANews* , April 1960.)

Two Cobras

At 0200 on the third and final day of ground force operations, two AH-

ILLUSTRATED BY Osborn

1T *Cobra* helicopter crews were awakened after five hours' sleep. They briefed for a night flare illumination mission. After launch from their tactical landing zone (LZ) at about 0300, the *Cobras* rendezvoused and proceeded to the mission area. It was a very dark night with neither moon nor horizon. There was a haze layer from 500 to 1,200 feet, but the ceiling was unlimited above, with 5 to 7 miles' visibility.

Once in the target area, the flight orbited for 45 minutes before flare drop commenced. During this time, the weather worsened, forcing the flight leader to abort the mission and return to the landing zone. Because of decreasing visibility. The flight tried a TACAN penetration into a nearby auxiliary airfield. The *Cobras* broke out beneath the haze at 700 feet where visibility was excellent.

The LZ controller radioed that the LZ ceiling was now 600 to 700 with good visibility. Since the two aircraft couldn't refuel at the auxiliary field in time for an 0700 mission which they had been assigned, the flight leader decided to proceed under the overcast at 450 feet altitude to the LZ.

Lead made one identification pass over the LZ at 300 feet and turned downwind for landing with *Cobra* Two in loose cruise formation at lead's five o'clock.

The visibility was worse than estimated, causing the lead some difficulty in locating the 420-by-270-foot landing zone. The pilot, fighting vertigo, flew "on the gauges" while the copilot called vectors to the LZ. *Cobra* Two maintained its five o'clock position on lead throughout the approach.

On final, *Cobra* One's copilot called, "We're low!" Seeing that his closure rate was too fast and visual cues were poor, the pilot decided to wave off. He began a left turn for another try and asked *Cobra* Two for his position. *Cobra* Two said he was at the leader's six o'clock and would stay there but he had lost actual sight of *Cobra* One.

As lead continued his second approach, *Cobra* Two requested *Cobra* One's position from the LZ but received no reply. *Cobra* Two then radioed that he now had the lead in sight. *Cobra* One decided that the visibility was too poor to make a landing and transmitted he was returning to the auxiliary field.

The wingman was 800 to 1,000 feet to the west, paralleling the lead's course. To LZ personnel *Cobra* Two appeared to be dangerously low and in a slight rate of descent. LZ personnel tried to warn the helo but their transmission was blocked out by *Cobra* Two's last transmission: "Lead, I'm at your 11 o'clock low." The helo crashed into the trees, killing the crew.


Grampaw Pettibone says:

This was a tragic and needless loss. There are many lessons to be learned from it. The mishap board concluded that the pilot was attempting to effect a low-level join-up rendezvous on his leader and did not monitor his instrument gauges closely enough to avoid the insidious settling into the trees. Possible courses which could have contributed to the accident were: lack of low altitude warning system; overscheduling, which may have led to pilot fatigue; and nonstandard and inadequate lighting in landing zone.

Gramps wonders whether this crew was ready for such a mission with visibility as poor as it was and their significantly low amount of recent flight hours. (The pilot had 3.7 hours; the copilot .7 hours.) The flyers who were lost were relatively inexperienced.

Clearly, there is a need to be careful in scheduling such crews.