

GRAMPAW PETTIBONE

Night Rendezvous

An A-6 *Intruder* was leading a nighttime, multiplane, war-at-sea strike. The rendezvous was briefed for 2,000 feet abeam the carrier, right-hand turns. Visibility was three to five miles in haze, but there was a high, bright moon which created a milk bowl-type effect in the area. With an A-7 already aboard, the lead A-6 left the rendezvous circle to rendezvous on the EA-6B, who had lost both TACAN and INS and had not sighted the A-6. Having previously seen the *Prowler*, the A-6 began joining what was perceived to be the EA-6B, but was really the plane guard helicopter. A descent commenced as the A-6 crew became distracted by the high closure rate and unusual light patterns on what they continued to think was the *Prowler*. Noting the descent, the BN transmitted a caution as the flight passed through 1,000 feet. The BN's UHF switch malfunctioned but the call went over the ICS. The descent continued. The A-7 pilot transmitted, "Check your altitude." Two seconds later, as the *Intruder* was pulling up, the *Corsair II* struck the glassy water in a flat attitude, bounced, then hit the surface again and exploded. The pilot was killed.



Grampaw Pettibone says:

What can I say? These pilots had excellent reputations. But a breakdown in scan pattern and sound judgment led to disaster. Crew coordination was not the best in the *Intruder*. Basic air work went by the boards. Plus, the *Intruder* crew failed to reset the radar altimeter from the 50-foot launch setting, which didn't help.

Dissimilar aircraft, right-hand rendezvous, nighttime conditions with less than ideal visibility: these become nasty ingredients when mixed together, even for veteran aviators.

Don't allow yourself to be drawn into the spider's web. Know when to withdraw from a bad situation. Stay ahead of your aircraft. In this kind of work, neither leaders nor wingmen can ever lighten up on the concentration.



Day After the Night Before

The pilot and RIO of a fighter squadron beach detachment in the Pacific launched about noontime on a 1.5-hour local fam flight. The weather forecast included multiple cloud layers throughout the operating area. These were associated with a southwest monsoon.

The night before, the pilot and RIO attended a wetting down party that lasted until about 2:00 a.m. On the morning of the sortie, a squadron officer suggested that the flyers cancel the flight because they were not in condition to fly. They disregarded this caution.

At the expiration of the fighter's ETA, tower personnel began an unsuccessful series of checks on its whereabouts. A search began but was severely

hampered by a lack of information about the aircraft's route of flight. The crew had not indicated specifically where they were going in the operating area. Later, it was presumed that they had planned to fly low-level and accumulate flight time while deviating as necessary to avoid significant weather and maintain VMC.

In the afternoon of the next day, an Air Force C-130 crew spotted parachutes on the ground. Due to rugged terrain, poor weather and USAF helicopter mechanical difficulties, a rescue party didn't reach the site until 10:00 p.m. the following night. The pilot and RIO were dead. The parachutes and seat pans of both men were still attached to them. Although proof was not conclusive, it appeared that the men died on impact after the command ejection and prior to full inflation of the main parachute canopies.

Despite an extensive search effort, the aircraft was not discovered until four weeks later when a civilian pointed out to authorities a narrow, ravine-like valley where wreckage was scattered over a one-half-square-mile area. Investigators believe the aircraft crashed at a very high speed and steep dive angle.

Two and a half weeks later, a farmer came forward and said he was plowing a field (at the time of the mishap) and saw a jet aircraft heading inland through a valley. The plane pulled up abruptly and the farmer looked away. Hearing a small bang coming from the plane, he spotted it again. (The bang may have indicated the ejection.) The nose of the plane was passing below the horizon. The aircraft then crashed behind a hill about a mile from the farmer's position. He saw no parts falling from the aircraft, nor were there signs of smoke or fire prior to impact. He did not see the crew eject.



Grampaw Pettibone says:

We'll never know what precisely happened to this crew, but it is quite likely that they violated the 12-hour bottle to throttle rule (described in OPNAV instruction 3710.1K) and shouldn't have flown on this day.

Friends, I don't like to think how many times I've told tales like this since

Ole Gramps began storytellin' back in Double U Double U Two. But I'm gonna keep tellin' tales like this as long as there's a need for the message.

According to the evidence, the fighter's engines, flight controls and other components were working OK. Sure seems that wetting down party had somethin' to do with the cause of the accident, along with the weather, too.

I ain't gonna beat this into the ground. But I sure would like it if each and every one of you in Naval Aviation would give the problem thought. Also, I know it's a tough decision, but if you believe a squadron mate ought not to fly because that mate isn't mentally or physically ready, press your case.

Quick Kiss on the Belly

An A-6E was on an overwater night practice bombing mission. The unraked and unlit target was located on an island. Weather was VFR with three to six-foot sea swells. The pilot descended to 500 feet for the run-in at 400 knots. He set the radar altimeter at 450 feet. The BN's

attention, meanwhile, was totally focused on his scope.

Realizing the *Intruder* was about 30 degrees off the run-in line, the pilot banked the *Intruder* steeply to the right, then to the left again, pulling some G's in the process, to get on track. About 20 seconds later the crew heard a thump and felt a momentary deceleration. The pilot immediately gained altitude so that his wingman could check the aircraft. At first the crew thought they had suffered a bird strike. Instead, they had struck the water.

The wingman discovered that the A-6's centerline tank, except for some ragged edges, had been torn from the aircraft. There was also damage to the mid and aft engine bay doors. The pilot in the beleaguered aircraft tried to perform a slow flight check but couldn't lower the wheels and flaps. He eventually blew the gear down and made a successful no-flap landing at a shore-based divert field.



Grampaw Pettibone says:

Sufferin' sea swells! These two blokes

rubbed shoulders with the grim reaper and got away with it!

A while back another crew crashed and was killed on a similar attack run. Evidence showed they were at low altitude, fast and turning hard, correcting to the run-in line.

A-6s belong in the low-level, night-time or IMC environment. That's where they make their money. It's also a dangerous place if you throw caution to the wind even for a second.

This *Intruder* crew was pressing hard to make a good run. The BN was busy mindin' his own store as the pilot worked his way onto the bomb line. Neither heard the altitude warning tone. With all that turning, it might not have come on. Or, if it did, the stress factor at the moment might have prevented them from hearing it. And that's the point: horsin' a fast-movin' jet around at night at 500 feet is askin' for trouble. Don't make big corrections!

If you've fouled up down low, and movin' along at a good clip, abort and try again. The grim reaper ain't satisfied just rubbin' shoulders.

