GRAMPAW PETTIBONE

ILLUSTRATED BY Osborn

Tomcat Topple

The pilot of an F-14 on elevator number three was advised that the *Tomcat* would be moved to catapult number three for launch. While the RIO preflighted the lower portion of the aircraft, the pilot manned the front cockpit to ride the brakes and continue his preflight. He also began to cycle the hand hydraulic pump to ensure brake pressure would be available for the move. The director doubled as tow tractor driver because a driver wasn't immediately available. He connected the tractor to the *Tomcat* for the move.

After about six strokes of the pump, the pilot detected a "commotion" in his peripheral vision. He had not acknowledged a breakdown signal from the director in the tractor, so was surprised to look up and note the F-14 moving backwards. The ship had commenced a roll to starboard. (The director had signaled for breakdown and, although he did not receive an acknowledgment from the pilot, thought that via "eye contact" the pilot knew the aircraft would be unchained. Blue shirts unhooked all chains on one main mount and one on the opposite wheel of the aircraft.)

The pilot double-checked the parking brake "on" and continued to cycle the pump while depressing the brakes. But the aircraft continued to slide. Another director intervened, gave the emergency stop signal, and blew his whistle.

The director in the tractor, meanwhile, had checked his parking brake "on" and applied normal brakes as the aircraft moved towards the coaming, pulling the tractor along with it. The starboard main mount then struck the coaming. The port mount snapped the side tending chain as it rolled back with the chock in place. The director in the tractor released the parking brake as the deck steadied and accelerated the tractor to move the aircraft away from the edge of the elevator.

As the aircraft moved forward, the port main mount split the chock and the aft tending chain snapped. The ship then rolled starboard a second time, causing the F-14 to roll backwards again. Sensing he was *in extremis*, the pilot hurried onto the boarding ladder as the main mounts traveled over the coaming and into the safety net. As the aircraft pivoted nose up, the pilot pushed away from the airplane and landed on the elevator deck, suffering minor injuries. The RIO

and other personnel were clear.

The *Tomcat* achieved a 70-degree, nose-up attitude, with the drop tanks resting on the coaming. The tractor's rear wheels rose off the deck. The driver jumped to safety before the tractor broke free. The aircraft paused precariously a few seconds and then fell overboard. The *Tomcat* disappeared into the sea and sank to the bottom, 9,000 feet away.

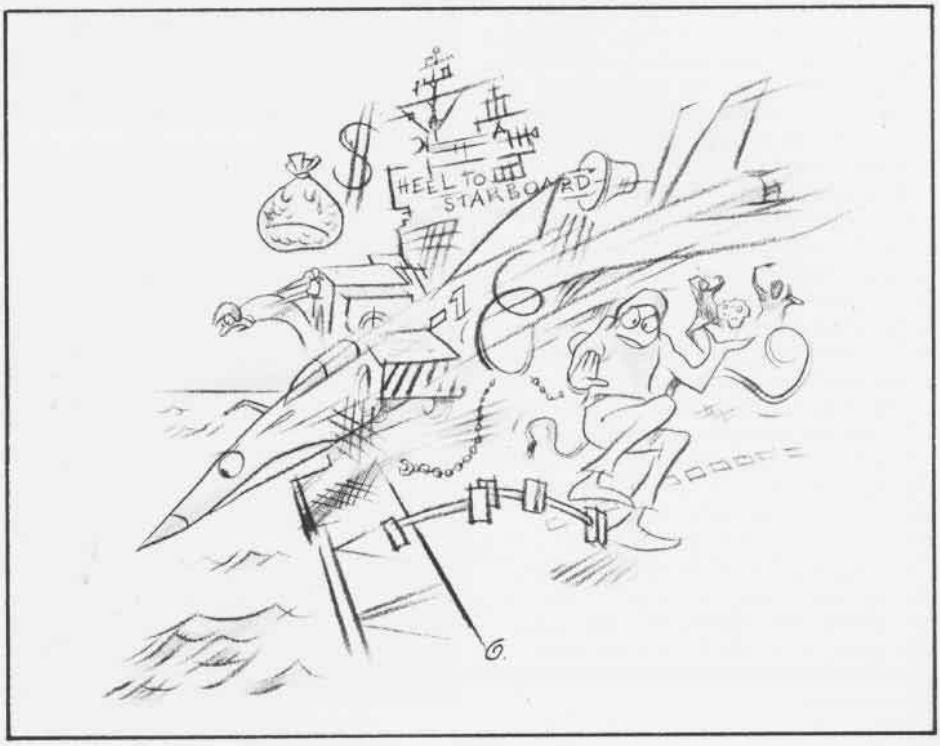
Grampaw Pettibone says:

Sure wish we coulda traded King Neptune the tractor for the Tomcat!

The finger of blame's got more than one target for this fiasco. In deck edge moves, the book calls for a director, a tractor driver and two chock walkers. Not only did the director double up as tractor driver, he wasn't always plainly visible to the pilot in the cockpit. The pilot didn't see the breakdown signal. He was wearing sunglasses so "eye contact" with the director was limited at best.

Plus, nobody directly involved in the accident realized the carrier was in a turn. There was a "heel to starboard" call over the 5MC speaker from primary in anticipation of the ship's turn to port and 10-foot swells. But with other aircraft turning up and the starter units operating, the precautionary message was drowned out.

Lack of communication between the director and the pilot allowed removal of the tie-down chains and chocks before adequate brake accumulator



hydraulic pressure could be obtained via the hand pump. The aircraft's momentum caused by the flattop's roll to starboard was simply too great for the tractor to control without help from aircraft brakes. If the pilot had had more time to cycle the pump, this mishap might have been avoided. About 40 increasingly difficult strokes are needed to attain sufficient pressure. He could only execute six. By the time the intended director arrived, the breakdown signals were already being given by the director at the tractor.

During the slide, traction was lost due to cross-deck pendants, which had been stowed on the elevator. Tractor skid marks in front of and behind the cables indicated there was momentary loss of traction, which sure didn't help matters.

The roof's a dang tough place to work, a place where a mistake or two can cost us a truckload of dollars. Like the price tag on one fine Tomcat resting useless in the very deep six.

In the aviati'n business, there can be no letup in the war against mistakes! Especially aboard the floating runways that pitch and roll on King Neptune's sea.

Lucky Landings

A student Naval Aviator in a TA-4J was on a solo night FCLP hop with five other *Skyhawks*. Following final touchdown in the simulated carrier box (left of the runway centerline), the SNA advanced the throttle and retracted speed brakes, as if to take off again. He realized his error, retarded the throttle and extended the speed brakes. In the process, however, the throttle was inadvertently moved to the off position.

The SNA did not realize he had shut down the engine until the generator dropped off the line and all electrical power was lost, with 5,000 feet of rollout remaining. He eased the aircraft toward the centerline and stopped 1,000 feet prior to the end of the runway, slightly right of center.

The five remaining *Skyhawks* came to full stops behind the lead TA-4J, with reduced landing separation interval.

The tower controller initially believed the first *Skyhawk* had only lost lights. Thus, the controller made no attempt to wave off or warn the other SNAs. The first three aircraft passed by number one but various UHF transmissions failed to promptly clarify the situation. No one, including the LSOs or tower personnel, fully understood what had happened until all aircraft had completed their rollouts. Nevertheless, the three SNAs and their *Skyhawks* retired safely to the squadron flight line and number one was ultimately towed in to join them.

Grampaw Pettibone says:

Whew! Hand me my bandana so I can wipe the sweat off my brow.

We coulda lit up the night with this caper. Skyhawks might have run into each other like a column of tumblin' dominoes, or Larry, Curly and Moe tryin' to board a trolley car at the same time.

Be careful when haulin' that throttle back. But if somebody does shut down without plannin' on it, any and all wingmen/observers need to get on the horn and make clear reports on the circumstances. In this case, the tower should have been advised ASAP by one or more of the SNAs that there was a "dark" and powerless bird on the strip. Warnings and/or wave-offs would have followed instead of some unsettlin' "passages in the night."

We lucked out in this case and didn't illuminate the night with a fireball.

Fatal Attraction

A flight of five F/A-18 *Hornets* were to make 15-degree, pop-up bombing maneuvers with MK 82 inert bombs on a target located in a lake bed. Visibility was excellent. Winds were calm. Due to unprecedented seasonal watersheds several years prior to the flight, a portion of the overall training area had become an inland lake. The lake was about 25 miles wide and 13 miles long with a maximum depth of eight feet. Run-in to the target would be over the lake.

The mission commander briefed a right-hand pattern with a 060-degree, run-in heading. Because of refueling delays, two of the *Hornets* took off late. Before the two aircraft arrived, the mission commander, noting the smooth, still surface of the water, warned the others in the flight about the disorienting effect of flying over the lake bed. Thus, the late arrivers, including the mishap pilot, did not hear the warning concerning the glassy surface of the lake.

The mishap pilot made a right, descending turn to about 1,100 feet AGL to intercept the inbound heading to the target. He continued the approach and was on a heading of 047 degrees at about 400 knots when the *Hornet* struck the water and exploded. The pilot was killed. There were no radio transmissions from the pilot directly prior to the crash and there was no attempt at ejection.

Grampaw Pettibone says:

Glassy water is deadly when racin' over it at a "bat-outta you-know-what" speed.

Other pilots on the flight described the water as "mirror-like, glassy, greenish in color, and disorienting."

The mishap pilot had a predominantly fighter background before transitioning to the Hornet. Thus, he was somewhat inexperienced in the low-level environment. Also, he had apparently failed to select the radar altimeter option on the heads-up display and was therefore receiving no low-altitude cues on the HUD.

He simply and tragically flew into the water.

"Mirror-like" seas have lured many an aviator into their fatal clutches. Depth perception can be lost when zippin' along down low over waveless water.

The message is as clear as the menacing mirrors of H_20: be aware of the hazard, stay safely above the "glass," and use your altitude warning systems as a backup to good airmanship.