Osborn

Shadows in the Moonlight

A pilot and radar intercept officer (RIO), both highly experienced, with a fleet readiness squadron tour behind them, were on a night field carrier landing practice (FCLP) hop in an F-14 after being out of the *Tomcat* cockpit for two years. The pilot worked hard turning "fair" passes into "OKs" while the RIO struggled against FCLP boredom by scribbling down a description of each approach in landing signal officer (LSO)-type shorthand. By the fifth pass, both men were feeling comfortable in the pattern.

On No. 1's sixth try, two other *Tomcats* (401 and 402), ahead of them in the pattern, called "last pass" and switched to the tower for full-stop landings. No. 1 made a touch and go and noticed that 401 and 402 were on the downwind leg for their full-stop landings in the "low" pattern. No. 1 figured 401 and 402 were aiming for the parallel right runway since the tower had not transmitted on the LSO's frequency their intent to land on the left, FCLP, runway.

As No. 1 reached the 180-degree position, the lights for the left runway came on, 401 having already landed. There were still no transmissions by the tower or LSO concerning the status of the left runway with respect to FCLPs (such as foul-deck or clear-deck calls).

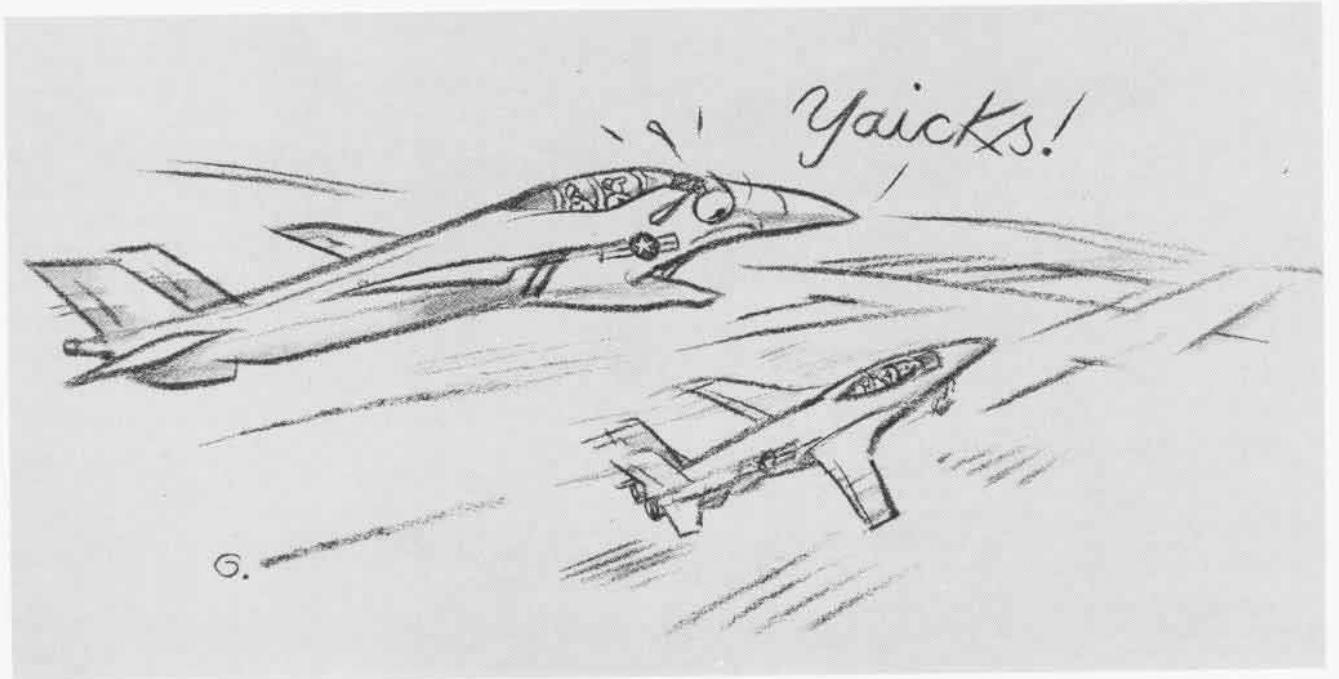
Meanwhile, 402 was at a deep 90-degree position, apparently headed for a full stop on the right runway although there were no transmissions by the tower or LSO to confirm this. No. 1, therefore, believed 402 was destined for the right airstrip although as the *Tomcat* neared the "90," the RIO became uncomfortable about 402's location. He said nothing, though, assuming that his pilot was aware of 402's position.

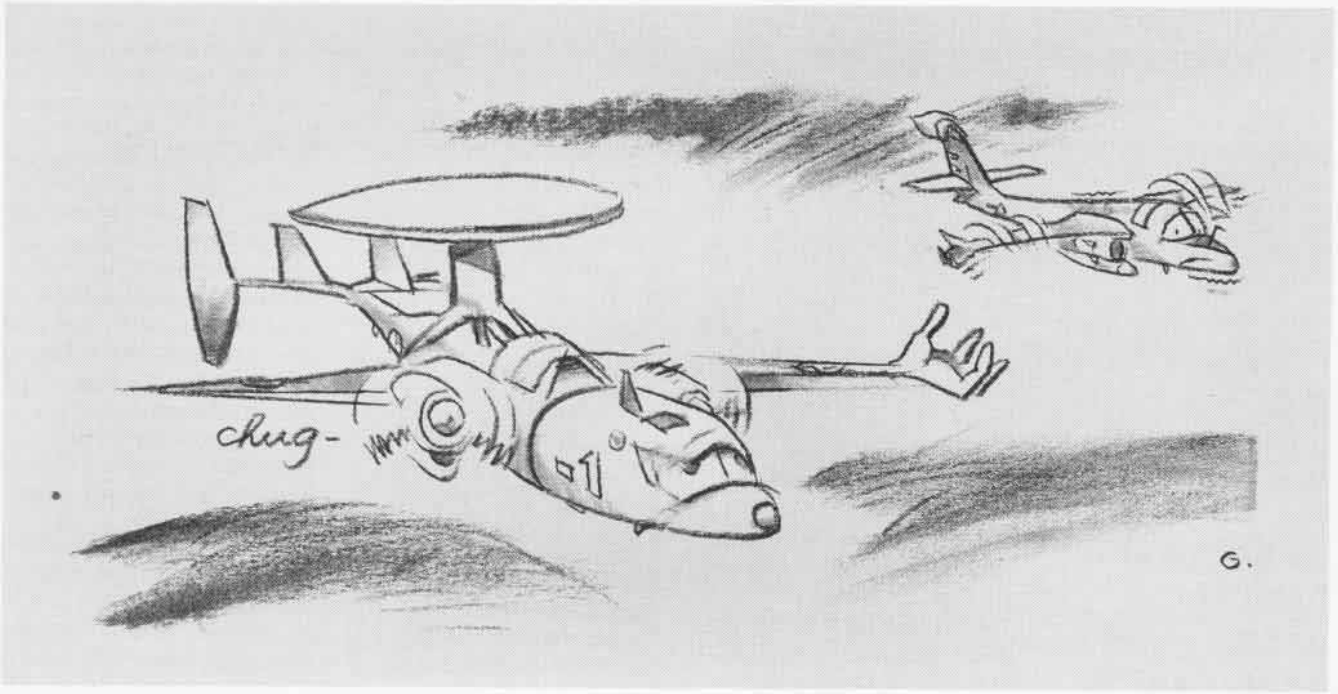
When No. 1 reached the "45," the RIO asked the pilot if he knew the location of 402 (now on final and beginning to disappear from view under No. 1's right wing, and no longer aligned for the right runway).

"I think he is going to the right," the pilot told the RIO.

"No, I believe he's underneath us going to the left," the RIO responded.

The pilot immediately dipped his wing to check the area. Both he and the RIO experienced the cold chill of surprise when they saw 402 only 100 feet below them! The pilot rapidly leveled the wings, added power, and waved off.





Grampaw Pettibone says:

After not flyin' for a spell, a pair of veterans were doin' their thing in a Tomcat and beginnin' to feel good in the cockpit when the "fat, dumb and happy" mindset, made famous by ole Dilbert, reared its dangerous head. Had the RIO not wondered about the whereabouts of 402, No. 1 and 402 might have had a real air-to-air engagement – in spades!

They were lucky. They admitted their complacency. It shouldn't happen again to these guys, or to you!

Prowling with a Hawkeye

They were in the Persian Gulf combat zone at night: an E-2C *Hawkeye* at 22,000 feet with all navigation equipment inoperative, except for pitot static and the back-up gyro, and an EA-6B *Prowler* coming off station after electronic warfare duty. Another E-2C asked the *Prowler* to assist the ailing *Hawkeye*. There was weather in the area and St. Elmo's fire, which may have caused the E-2C's standby compass to fail.

In the vicinity of the carrier, the *Prowler* climbed through an overcast, sighted the *Hawkeye*, and took position well off its left wing. It was difficult to keep the E-2C in sight from a distance because of cloud layers. The EA-6B slowed to 210 knots and the E-2C began to fly wing on it from about a mile away, at which point the dissimilarities between the aircraft became more vivid. The *Prowler* experienced increasing difficulty in remaining slow enough to stay with the *Hawkeye*. The ship advised the *Prowler* to guide the *Hawkeye* down through the overcast.

As the two planes descended, in and out of the layers, the *Prowler* began a slow turn to the left and suddenly went IFR (instrument flight rules) into the clouds. The *Hawkeye*, fortunately, found a hole, made its way down through it, sighted the ship, and made a safe landing.

The *Prowler*, meanwhile, was gripped by St. Elmo's fire, resulting in a "frozen" pitot static system, which came back on the line as it descended through 10,000 feet. The *Prowler* bolted on its first approach but successfully trapped on the second.

Grampaw Pettibone says:

Flyin' combat is risky enough. But you can get mangled just as easy gettin' to and from the combat zone. The Prowler crew wanted to help their shipmates, which is fine and dandy. But as one of the Prowler aircrewmen said afterwards about the formation flying effort between a jet and a turboprop aircraft, "We were wallowing around up there like an overloaded truck!" Which means to Ole Gramps they were close to a stall or worse, what with St. Elmo, dark of night, and overcast layers fillin' the sky.

Maybe this was a time say, "Unable to assist," and get help from another E-2. Besides, those Hawkeye pilots are among the finest in the fleet and can handle no-gyro approaches. Isn't that why we practice 'em? I'm not sayin', "Don't help out a shipmate," but I am sayin', "Don't push your bird beyond what it can handle."

Gramps' Mailbag

Gramps receives articles periodically which range from accounts of near accidents to letters of commendation for acts of real professionalism. If you would like to share an experience, send your letter to: Grampaw Pettibone, c/o Naval Aviation News, Bldg. 159E, Room 512, Washington Navy Yard Annex, Washington, D.C. 20374-1595.