

Super Stallion Saga

A CH-53E *Super Stallion* launched from an LPH with a crew of five for a night vision goggle (NVG) training flight which was to include formation work with another CH-53E. Maintenance personnel asked the helicopter aircraft commander (HAC) to perform a single point performance check (SPPC) during the flight. This entails verifying certain engine and aircraft performance characteristics at a specified altitude.

The HAC briefed the crew that the SPPC would be conducted before joining a second aircraft for the formation phase of the flight. Weather was about 200 feet broken with 10 miles visibility. The entire crew wore NVGs.

Once airborne, the helo proceeded toward its assigned sector to perform the SPPC. Outbound from the ship, the copilot reported the *Super Stallion* was leaving 300 for 500 feet. This was the aircraft's last transmission.

When it was determined the helo was lost, search efforts began, a 2-3 second burst of signal flares was sighted but no follow-up contact made, and an oil slick was found. Next morning, the copilot's body was discovered and pieces of wreckage were collected. The other four members of the crew were lost at sea.



Grampaw Pettibone says:

Mystery of mysteries! We'll never know what really happened, but it's most likely the *Super Stallion* crashed into the sea hard—and at high speed—based on the condition of portions of the helo and crew gear which were found.

Why did the helo crash? Spatial disorientation, most likely. Contrary to the weather forecast, there was dense fog in the operating area. Investigators think the CH-53E entered the unexpected fog just about the time the SPPC was to begin. There was no indication of engine or control failure.

During an SPPC, the pilots split the flight controls between them



while doing the check. The HAC usually controls the collective and speed control levers while the copilot has the rudder pedals, the cyclic and the responsibility for obstacle clearance.

Could be the sudden entrance into the fog messed up their concentration and crew coordination. No tellin' the effect of the NVGs. And at 500 feet, there's not much room to recover from an unusual attitude.

Investigators figured the flares might have been set off by one of the crewmen before he disappeared.

About SPPCs. The performance charts provide SPPC data at sea level, 500, 1,000, 2,000, 3,000-foot increments up to 10,000 feet. Most pilots prefer to do the checks at the lowest possible altitude, but usually not below 1,000 feet. It's a safety margin, gents, and one that may have saved this aircraft and crew. If they've got to be done at night, Ole Gramps recommends setting up at no less than 1,000 feet.

Not much you can do about unexpected fog—except to expect it, no matter what the forecasters tell you, especially over water.

Orion Agony

A P-3C *Orion* (#2) launched late at night from NAS West Coast to relieve another P-3C (#1) already on station con-



ducting an antisubmarine warfare exercise with other battle group ships and aircraft. Weather in the area consisted of broken clouds and isolated rainshowers. Aircraft #1's autopilot was acting up, causing an additional workload on the pilots, plus the *Orion* was in and out of icing conditions at about 3,000 feet.

Orion #2 cruised toward the rendezvous at 21,000 feet with FACSFAC (Fleet Air Control and Surveillance Facility) communicating with the P-3s and tracking their positions on radar. The second P-3 began a descent toward the first's position, intending to execute a "tactical swap," relieving #1, and taking over the MP (maritime patrol) mission in the exercise.

At 0203, #1 and #2 established communications and #2 was cleared to descend to 3,500 feet. *Orion* #1 was holding 2,700 feet.

At 0206, #2 was heard to say, "Right below us." Instantly after that, #1 said, "Affirmative." Then #1 stated he had a TACAN A/A (tactical air navigation air-to-air mode) lock-on with a reading of 3.5 miles, which was acknowledged by #2.

At 0207, #1 stated that it had been a long night for his aircraft. He added he had been unable to loiter an engine except for two hours and had used engine anti-ice most of the night.

Still in a descent, #2 reported on station for the MP at 0208. Two minutes later, #2 acknowledged a transmission from another unit, the last recorded from #2 by the aircraft carrier involved in the exercise. Between 0211 and 0212, #1 transmitted a message to a *Seahawk* helicopter working in the area. This was the last one noted by the carrier for P-3C #1.

FACSFAC noted that #1's altitude had increased from 2,700 to 3,000 feet. Between 0213 and 0214, a fiery explosion was witnessed by several units. The P-3s had collided in midair. A total of 27 personnel were on both aircraft. There were no survivors.



Grampaw Pettibone says:

This horrible accident proves the sky can become fatally crowded



even when there aren't many aircraft around. Investigators figure that #1 lost situational awareness at a critical time in the tactical swap, which led to its climbing as #2 was descending.

The plane commander in #1 occupied either the pilot or copilot seat for at least 7 of the 9.1 hours flown prior to the collision, so fatigue very likely was a villain in this tragedy.

The night was extremely dark and the scattered cloud layers called for extra vigilance, especially to avoid icing conditions. Continuous altitude changes of plus or minus 200 feet indicated that #1 was flying without that malfunctioning autopilot. A sonobuoy barrier had been deployed by #1 to prosecute a possible contact, adding to the workload, shortly before the crash.

Ole Gramps can only remind all hands that Naval Aviation can be a grueling, unforgiving business at times, whether you're alert or dead tired. Sometimes a few feet don't matter—other times they are vital to survival. You just can't ever let your guard down.

Midairs like this are extremely rare, but even one of 'em is far, far too many.

Robert C. Osborn, illustrator of Grampaw Pettibone, Dilbert the Pilot and Spoiler the Mechanic, is retiring after more than 51 years of drawing this column in Naval Aviation News. See the July-August 1994 issue for our tribute to the artist's dedicated service to Naval Aviation.