Ted Wilbur

Cable Catastrophe

An HH-46 *Sea Knight* was on the last leg of a three-leg flight returning over land to the parent ship in the southwest Asian area. On board were the pilot, copilot and two enlisted crewmen. Passengers had been dropped off on an earlier leg.

Merchants on the ground saw the helo above some power lines, executing a descending turn toward a wadi (a ravine that is dry except during the rainy season). Two minutes later, a local farmer heard a loud explosion and reported the mishap to area police.

The aircraft had struck steel cables which ran across the 100-foot-wide wadi at 40 feet above the ground. The helo was in level flight, 100 knots at the time. The cables supported a manual pulley system used to cross the wadi during the rainy season. The pilot and two aircrewmen were killed on impact. The copilot was hospitalized but died from his injuries 11 days later. The aircraft was destroyed.

On one of the earlier legs that fatal day the *Sea Knight* was flown low enough to the ground at cruising speed to make the passengers noticeably uncomfortable. One of them even confronted the pilot after landing, extracting an acknowledgement from the pilot without significant reaction.

Flathatters linger in our midst like a rare virus. They're few and far between, but can be deadly. Maybe it's something chemical in the brain that makes 'em do it. The only answer is to identify the culprits (not always easy) and take corrective action before allowing 'em back at the controls. The Safety/NATOPS Officer was a friend of the pilot, which perhaps understandably stopped him from goin' to higher authority about the unsafe tendencies. Tough decision, but the price was tougher—four fatals and a helo.

Grampaw Pettibone says:

Gol Dang Flathatter! No two ways about it!

The investigators determined that this pilot was an overconfident type with an "overwhelming ego." On top of that, the Safety/NATOPS (Naval Air Training and Operating Procedures Standardization) Officer heard the pilot had been breakin' the rules—and he even scheduled a flight with his errant friend, to see for himself, two days before the crash.

The pilot demonstrated "canyon running" and "more aggressive maneuvering than necessary" to the Safety/Natops Officer—operating the HH-46D at 20 to 85 feet AGL (above ground level), 100–110 knots!

What happened to the "no lower than 500 feet AGL" rule?

The Safety/NATOPS Officer strongly cautioned the pilot to knock off that stuff. The pilot, who had an outstanding record otherwise, assured the officer he would.

Fearless Firefighters

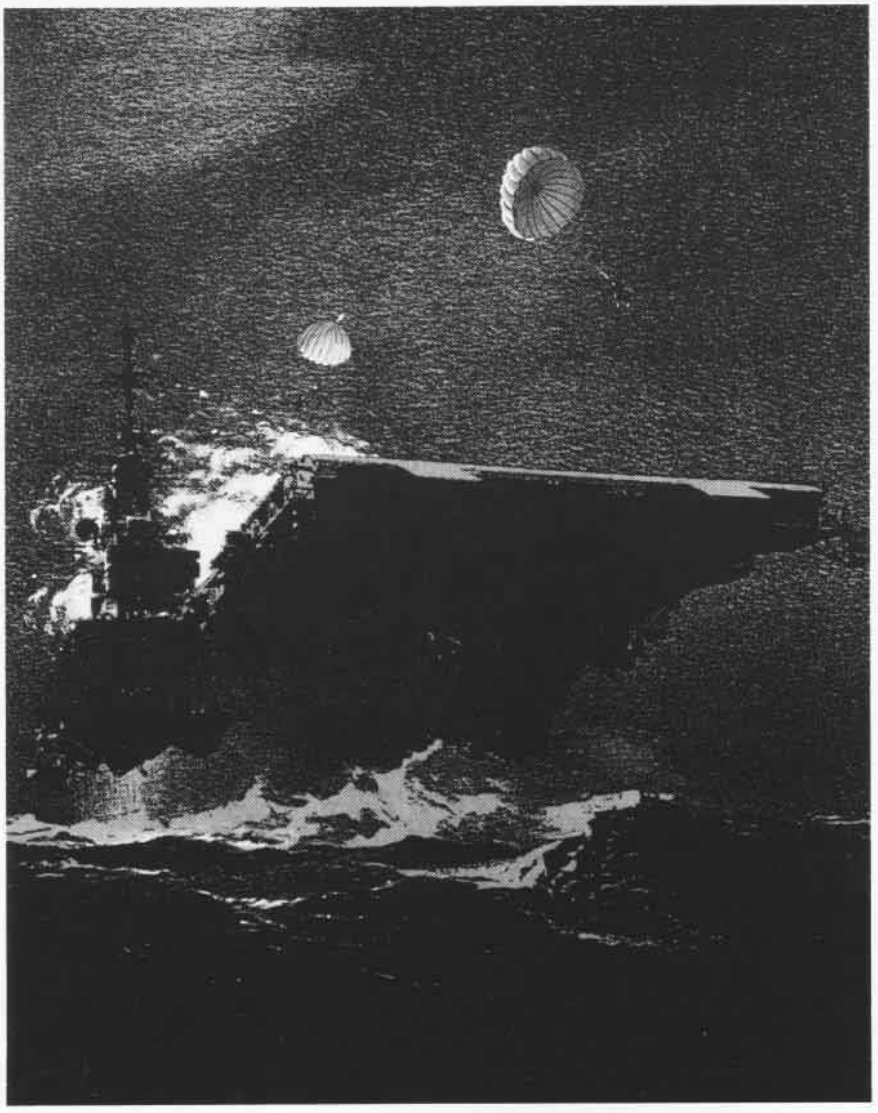
In the course of a night landing aboard *Kitty Hawk* (CV 63), an F-14 struck the ramp and exploded. The resulting fireball rolled down the flight deck as the *Tomcat* broke apart. A drop tank spewed fuel as it slid into the catwalk, carrying the flames with it. The crew ejected. The radar intercept officer landed on the forward part of the ship and was only slightly injured, but the pilot descended into the burning fuel in the landing area.

Even before the pilot hit the carrier's deck, rescuers leaped to action. ABH1(AW) Larry Spradlin and ABH2 Jose Dickson of the crash and salvage team were standing at the foul line where the angled and forward decks meet. They instantly gathered up fire hoses as the blaze illuminated the night sky. They saw the pilot tumble into the midst of the inferno and proceeded directly toward him. The pilot tried to jump up and run but became engulfed in flames. The aviation boatswain's mates quickly fought the fire in the immediate area of the pilot. With that threat diminished, they called for a rescue team before turning their hoses on the wreckage.

Meanwhile, ABH1(AW) Tim Goode had been standing on elevator two. He heard the F-14's tires explode, witnessed the instant blaze and hurried to the nearest AFFF (aqueous film forming foam) station. Hose line in hand, Goode started toward the fire. But then he noticed the pilot, still strapped into his seat pan and parachute, struggling on the deck. He had become entangled in his parachute lines while rolling several times to escape the searing flames.

Goode passed off the hose and tried to free the pilot. But the lifesaving chute began to reinflate, posing a new hazard as it started to drag the pilot down the flight deck. After 30 feet of travel, with Goode straining to collapse the chute, he called for a knife. AT2 Brandon Liesemeyer of Fleet Air Reconnaissance Squadron 5 had run up on deck to lend a hand in ridding the pilot of his harness. He reached into the pilot's survival gear, extracted a knife and cut the ropes.

Finally free of the lines, Liesemeyer removed the pilot's harness. He and Goode then dragged the aviator, badly burned but alive, from the hazardous area. They assisted him into a stretcher for quick transport to the medical emergency room. These young men, with help from other firefighters, got the conflagration under control in one minute, 18 seconds, and had it extinguished in less than two and a half minutes.



Grampaw Pettibone says:

These guys can sail on my ship anytime! They were trained, ready and got the job done.

What goes into a human being that prompts him or her to respond as gallantly as did these remarkable individuals has always been a mystery to Ole Gramps. The horrifying circumstances of a flight deck crash—particularly at night—tests the mettle of even the most courageous. How blessed we are in Naval Aviation to have such people among us. Capt. William Pickavance, Jr., *Kitty Hawk*'s CO, aptly put it this way: "They went right into fight the fire and get their shipmate out without any regard for themselves or their own safety. They're the best."

Gramps tips his leather flyin' helmet to JOC Brent Johnston of *Kitty Hawk*'s Public Affairs Office for his write-up of this heroic feat. Another tip goes to the indispensable Angie May of the Chief of Naval Operations' Aviation Safety Coordinator's office for her enduring support of this column.