



# GRAMPAW PETTIBONE

## Flirting with the Angels

The pilot reported to the squadron and assumed the operations duty watch at 0545 in the morning. When relieved at noon, he was immediately scheduled for a close air support flight in an A-4E which landed at 1430. He was then free until a 2130 briefing for a night support mission which took off on schedule at 2300.

An instrument departure was made with VFR conditions on top. As he leveled off at 18,500 feet msl about ten minutes after takeoff, he noticed the loss of his oxygen supply. Since the cabin altitude was only 9,500 feet, he removed his mask to ease breathing. He then initiated a left turn for a return to home plate and advised the controller he was aborting his mission because of a loss of oxygen. The controller directed an immediate right turn to avoid a restricted area. The pilot remembers making a hard right turn.

From that point on, the pilot's recollections are vague, and the account of the rest of the flight was reconstructed from the reports of the controller and wingman. The pilot



remembers pulling his emergency oxygen and placing the handle on the glare shield of the instrument panel. Thereafter he recalls only bright lights and noise in his earphones. The controller gave vectors to the pilot to bring him back to the base, but these were only acknowledged confusedly after many repetitions.

After being switched to approach control with some difficulty, the pilot was cleared for straight-in by GCA. Clearance was acknowledged, but the

pilot repeatedly requested the heading to the field though it had been given to him several times. After requesting a descent, he was cleared to 2,500 feet, given the weather and advised that there were layers of clouds, but that the field was VFR.

The pilot's wingman, who had been approximately one mile in trail after the individual instrument departures, had been attempting to join up at the time the pilot called in about losing his oxygen. His unsuccessful efforts were terminated when he lost sight of the *Skyhawk* as it entered a cloud layer.

In the soup, the pilot reported he was having extreme difficulty, was squawking emergency on his IFF and was preparing to eject. His wingman advised him to go to ram air on the pressurization system. This he acknowledged. He next said he was VFR at 1,500 feet and requested GCA. GCA talked him in to touchdown which was pretty good, considering circumstances. The aircraft bounced slightly, the pilot dropped his hook and was stopped by the arresting gear.

The crash crew helped the poor man out of the cockpit and he was taken to sick bay for examination.



Grampaw Pettibone says:

Great heavenly days! This lad must have been thinkin' pure thoughts all week. He's durn lucky to be around to breathe the pure free air.

The sad part of the story is that the squadron maintenance people and the personal equipment technicians were unable to determine any malfunction of equipment or find any discrepancy in the pilot's mask, the aircraft pressurization or the oxygen system. No incident report was filed, nor was an MOR (medical officer's report) prepared by the squadron regarding this unusual occurrence. Looks like this will be another one of those big question marks which next week may trap some other unwary pilot.

When oxygen problems develop, prompt positive procedures must be employed almost as an automatic response to assure a safe return to terra firma.



Illustrated by *Opbom*

## Mental Malfunction

The two-place TA-4F *Skyhawk* attack trainer was assigned to a cross-country flight from one southeastern air station to another. It was the first flight for the Marine captain following his NATOPS instrument check after about 50 hours of training in type. He had had no previous fixed-wing jet experience and only a few hours in other fixed wing types since he was a helicopter pilot by trade.

The rear seat passenger, a non-aviation-oriented PFC, was on his first flight in a jet aircraft. The pilot and the plane captain gave him a cockpit familiarization and seat check-out before they manned the aircraft.

The first leg to an intermediate AFB was incidental. Air traffic control cleared them considerably lower than their requested altitude and this necessitated a fuel stop en route.

Since it was but a short distance to their destination, the pilot asked that the external tanks not be filled with fuel. He also decided that, because the oxygen system was depleted, they wouldn't need to use their oxygen masks and would fly at low altitude for such a short hop.

As the men returned to their aircraft about an hour later to prepare for departure, the refueling crew was just finishing up. They offered to fill the drop tanks to which the pilot agreed.

When calling the tower, the pilot

changed his requested altitude of 25,000 feet to 5,000 feet and, upon receiving clearance, off they went. The 40-minute flight went smoothly at 5,000 to 7,000 feet. The *Skyhawk* entered the break at the NAS at 1,500 feet msl with a heavy load of 6,000 pounds of fuel still on board.

At the 90-degree position in order to give his wheels-down report to the tower, the pilot had to pick up his oxygen mask/mike from his lap and place it against his face. When he looked back at the instruments, the angle of attack was abnormally high and the bird had assumed a high rate of descent. Although he immediately went to a high power setting, the sink rate continued.

Seeing that they were not going to make their intended touchdown point, the pilot added 100% power and flattened the attitude just before they struck the runway threshold while still turning toward the landing line. The plane hit on the left wing tip and the drop tank, burst into flames and skidded off the runway to the right. It continued up the right side and came to a stop on a heading 70 to 80 degrees to the right of the runway. The aft section was burning fiercely.

As the stricken plane came to a halt, the pilot jettisoned the canopy, pulled his emergency harness release and attempted to climb out. Finding he was still caught, he called to his passenger to get out and sat down to unstrap.

The PFC asked frantically for help, but finding the pilot unable to assist him, took off his helmet, unstrapped by the normal method and climbed out of the aircraft alone. The pilot soon managed to get himself unstrapped, released his foot from the emergency oxygen cable and followed the passenger.

The pilot was met by the station C.O. who took him to the dispensary in his sedan. Both men were treated for severe first and second degree burns of the face, neck and arms. The passenger, who was not wearing gloves, had badly burned hands and required hospitalization.



Grampaw Pettibone says:

Great gallopin' ghosts! Of all the mental malfunctions I've ever run into, this 'un wraps it up. That 50 hours of instruction this guy had must've gone into a bottomless pit.

It's enough to make a grown man cry — as well as a few million taxpayers. It isn't as if this was the first time this sort of thing had happened! But no, it's not even the second, and it'll probably happen again.

Egads!

What kind of lax operational control was this pilot working under? He shouldn't've been outta sight of an instructor pilot 'til he had more hours in type, particularly with such a weak fixed-wing background.

He almost took an innocent enlisted man with him to that other world, one who was so ill prepared for the flight that he had not been through an ejection seat trainer or low pressure chamber run, and was not equipped with gloves, flight boots, life jacket or survival vest.

