

Mystery in the Mountains

An A-6E *Intruder* launched on a night, low-level terrain clearance navigation flight off the coast of a foreign country. The route had been approved. The area of the course featured sharply rising mountains with dense, "three-canopied" jungle terrain. The search radar terrain clearance (SRTC) mode of the radar system was "down" prior to flight but maintenance personnel were working to get it "up." The SRTC was required by squadron standard operating procedure (SOP) for such flights.

The squadron duty officer asked the crew what its intentions were if the SRTC was not ready, and they responded that they had permission to fly the route "radar only." About 15 minutes after launch, a transmission "in the blind" on the designated frequency was heard indicating the *Intruder* was beginning its low-level run. Neither the ship nor an airborne E-2 *Hawkeye* monitored or maintained a track on the A-6. There was no further radio or radar contact with the aircraft following the transmission.

An hour and a half later, when the *Intruder* did not check in at marshal, lost plane procedures were initiated. Search and rescue efforts, which began immediately, utilizing forward-looking infrared radar-capable air wing assets, were unsuccessful.

Later, a reliable source reported hearing jet noises followed by a loud explosion about 30 minutes after the *Intruder* would have begun the route. Isolated reports of seeing an aircraft on fire were also received. The area of these sightings is extremely rugged.

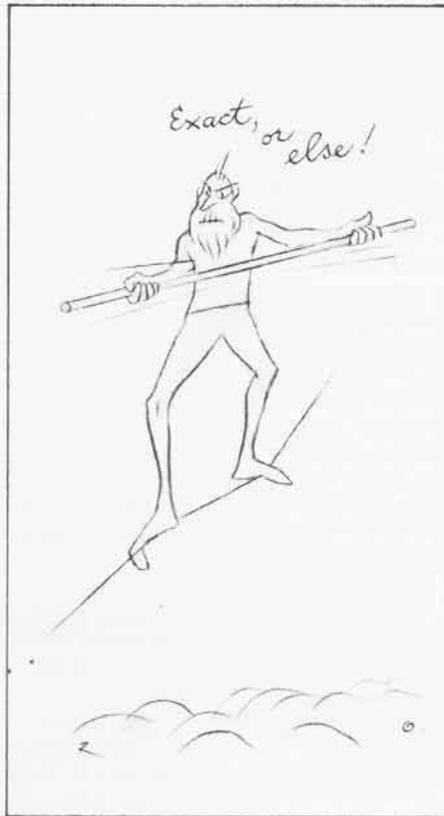
The search effort continued for 15 days, in the air and on the ground, but no signs of the aircraft or the crew were found.



Grampaw Pettibone says:

Gramps' head is hangin' mighty low over this one. The pilot and bombardier/navigator (BN) in this *Intruder* crew were considered first-rate, dedicated aviators. We'll never know what really happened to them, but investigators came up with some reasonable ideas.

The pilot, who had over 2,000 A-6 hours, had completed fleet readiness squadron training after a 15-month, nonflying period, but was new to the outfit, having flown only three hops in the squadron. The BN had been on



board for 15 months and specifically requested to fly with the pilot.

This was their first hop together, one of the toughest in the attack community — night, low-level terrain clearance, in unfamiliar terrain and locale. And neither had recent low-level or SRTC experience, not to mention exposure to terrain that was much, much more challenging than that which they practiced over at home.

Maintenance confirmed that the SRTC had been properly repaired in time for the flight. Weather wasn't a factor. Could be they hit a bird, of course. But all things considered, there's a reasonably good chance these men fell victim to loss of situational awareness and crashed in the mountains.

They had steeply rising terrain to contend with and irregular and not clearly defined valleys. Other aircrews reported the terrain being much more rugged and vertical than expected, with 2,000 to 4,000 foot-per-minute rates of climb required on the "upslope" legs along the route.

A number of charts prepared for the flight were time ticked at 360 knots except the one the BN picked. It was

figured at 420 knots at 1,000 feet above the ground. Neither crew member had recent (within 30 days) SRTC experience. So they were slated for the SRTC flight in violation of squadron SOP. And the schedulers knew this.

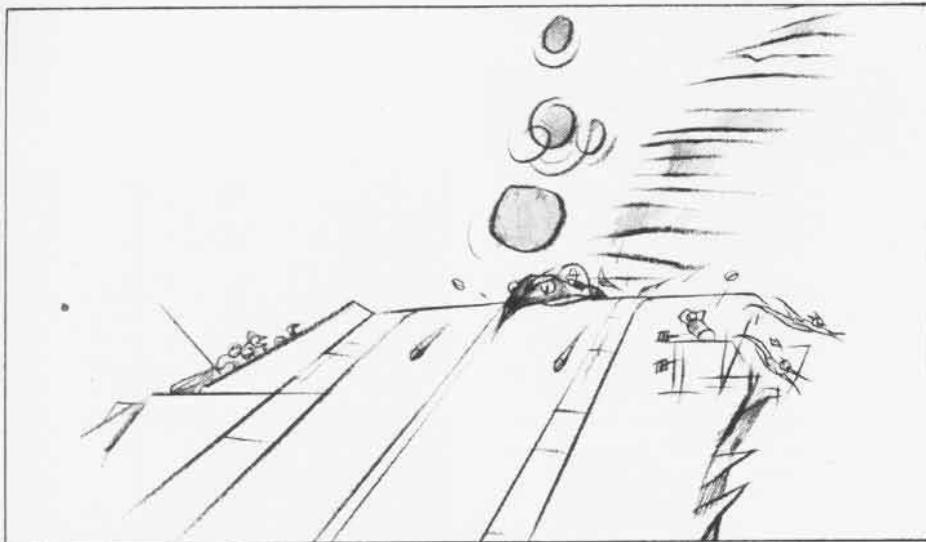
Both flyers were aggressive, talented, motivated and confident. Gramps sure can't fault 'em for those characteristics. But goin' out at night on a tough hop like this one, without recent night time, or low-level experience — and without having flown with each other before — was pushin' the odds in the wrong direction. It wasn't clear who gave the crew the OK to fly "radar only" if the SRTC went down. Point: If you're gonna have standard operating procedures in your outfit, you oughta abide by 'em. Or have a real good reason not to. In this case, Gramps can't find any real good reasons.

MOVLAS Miseries

An F/A-18 was approaching the carrier for a night arrested landing. The ship had experienced a power failure which caused a temporary loss of the Fresnel lens, pilot landing aid television (PLAT) and other systems. Power was regained for the *Hornet's* recovery but it was decided to utilize MOVLAS (manually operated visual landing aid system), due to the possibility of another power failure. Weather was VFR with seven miles visibility but it was "dark" because there was neither moon nor visible horizon.

At three-quarters of a mile, the *Hornet* driver was on course and slightly below glide path, although he stated he saw the ball in the center and that it went about one full cell high. He reduced power to work the ball down and added power slightly to catch it in the center. He added more power as the ball settled through the center and then added full military power followed by afterburner in response to the landing signal officer's (LSO) power call.

The *Hornet* struck the ramp on centerline, the main tires impacting the round-down three feet below flight deck level. The tail end of the F/A-18 erupted into flames as the plane continued down the centerline of the angle deck on its nose tires and external wing tanks. The pilot ejected just before the *Hornet* plunged off the end of the deck. He was rescued 12 minutes later.



Grampaw Pettibone says:

Holy Hornets! King Neptune got himself a nice item for the mantelpiece on this one.

Investigators couldn't determine exactly what MOVFLAS signals were being shown to the pilot in the approach. Makin' things worse, there were contradictions between statements and comments in the LSO grade book. (There is no method of recording MOVFLAS information on the PLAT or carrier air traffic control center tapes, either.)

Three LSOs on the platform agreed that the pilot started his approach low and continued low until the in-close position where he stopped his rate of descent. The controlling LSO said he used the MOVFLAS to show the pilot a slightly low ball at first, then, when the *Hornet* was "in the middle," a low ball. The backup LSO told the controlling LSO to show him "lower." The controlling LSO signalled the pilot with a red ball, at which time the pilot stopped his rate of descent. The controlling LSO then moved the ball up slowly to a low ball. He noticed the *Hornet* settling in close and immediately showed a full red ball, yelled for power and actuated the wave-off lights.

Tryin' hard wasn't good enough in this situation. Turns out the pilot had a tendency for not-enough-power-in-close and comedowns at the ramp. He had been gettin' better lately so the squadron LSO decided not to caution him 'bout these tendencies.

Also, there was pressure to increase

boarding rates and to do less talkin' to pilots on the ball and allow them to fly their own passes.

Ole Gramps is all for gettin' folks aboard in good, quick and quiet order. But this *Hornet* pilot sure could have used more timely advice than he got. And maybe the backup Paddles should have stepped in earlier, even at the expense of takin' over for a fellow experienced LSO.

Point is: We're all in this together — aviators, LSOs, seniors in the chain, everybody. Ego, pride and fast boarding rates shouldn't get in the way of safely bringin' the troops back aboard, 'specially when it's dark out.

Corsair Catastrophe

A pair of A-7Es launched on a low-level navigation training flight with the

pilot under instruction in the lead. The *Corsair* II's proceeded at high altitude to the starting point, then descended to begin the route. They were over water about two miles offshore at 500 feet above ground level.

Prior to the mishap, lead was observed to be relatively straight and level while the instructor, in the number two jet, appeared to be maneuvering side to side from the "chase" position.

From a point slightly aft and to the right of lead, the instructor commenced a left turn, closing on the number one aircraft. Approaching from about a 45-degree angle and slightly underneath, number two impacted the lead *Corsair*. Both aircraft exploded almost simultaneously and immediately crashed into the water below. There was no ejection attempt observed from either A-7. The pilots and the aircraft were lost.



Grampaw Pettibone says:

Dad blast it! Two good men. Two good planes. Gone forever!

Hard to say what truly caused this midair. Number two may have lost situational awareness and failed to recognize he was closin' in too fast. Maybe they were changin' leads and communications broke down. Maybe the instructor's chase position was too close and he got distracted for a fatal second.

Anyway, this tragedy proves the hard way that in Naval Aviation there just ain't much margin, if any, for error — especially in high-performance, single-piloted airplanes.

