

## Donut, Anyone?

In 1965 during combat operations in the Vietnam War, a division of A-1 *Skyraiders* (popularly called “Spads”) launched from an aircraft carrier on Yankee Station loaded with two 2,000-pound bombs on each of the inboard racks, plus smaller bombs on the wing racks. Their mission was to bomb a large barracks and truck staging area situated along what was called Route Package One. The plan was to climb to 10,000 feet before going over land in order to remain above the 137mm anti-aircraft artillery (AAA) burst altitude. One of the pilots recalled, “To get to that altitude with that heavy load in the Spad took an eternity.”

All went well until the flight began leveling off at 10,000 feet, still over the water. Suddenly and with great urgency the flight leader’s wingman, number two in the formation, transmitted over the radio: “I’m hit! I’m hit!” Instinctively, the other three pilots rapidly scanned all around looking for flak. There was none.

“I’ll drop back and look you over,” the flight leader said to number two. After thoroughly checking the aircraft he reported, “You have no visible damage.” Moreover, there were no malfunctions indicated by number two’s instruments. The flight continued on the mission, completed the strike and returned to the ship.

**Grampaw Pettibone says:**

**The sound that pilot heard must have felt like a thunderclap up close to his eardrums. Here’s the story:**

Gramps doubts if the young fliers of today ever heard of the Spad driver’s “donut.” It was an inner tube—purchased privately because it was not in the standard inventory of pilot gear—used to ease buttocks pain on long *Skyraider* flights. Some pilots actually sat on “maternity” tubes designed as cushions for pregnant women. A flexible tube was rigged to the donut’s valve so the pilot could control the inflation level.

In this case the pilot had overinflated his inner tube, and it slowly expanded as his *Skyraider*



continued the long climb to 10,000 feet, where the inflation exceeded the maximum pressure the tube could handle. Result: kaboom!

**Postscript: on a subsequent flight, this same pilot’s canopy was hit by AAA. Shards of canopy glass struck his neck and upper torso, for which he earned a Purple Heart. But Ole Gramps has a feeling that in terms of**

**memorable events in one’s career, the sound of that donut exploding beneath him ranks right up there with earning the coveted award.**

Courtesy of Capt. Gordon Wileon, USN (Ret.)

## Nose High

In 1964 a C-121J *Super Constellation* was en route from Agana, Guam, to Japan with passengers aboard. The first landing was scheduled at Tachikawa AFB, Japan. The copilot was in the left seat, with the squadron CO in the right seat. The CO planned for the lieutenant, an experienced pilot, to make the approach and landing at Tachikawa.

The flight was routine. The landing gear was extended during descent for landing to expedite the descent; a little later, the gear was raised. The *Super Connie* was subsequently cleared for radar vectors to a ground controlled approach final. On intercepting the glide path, the wheels were lowered but the cockpit instrument indicated the nose wheel was not locked down. It was visual flight rules and the field was in sight. The skipper cycled the gear but the unsafe indication remained, so the plane waved off.

The radioman alerted the passengers there would be a delay in landing. The crew labored to get the nose wheel down, but the emergency system failed to lock the nose wheel in place. Recycling the gear didn’t work, either. The CO told the copilot to concentrate on flying the aircraft while he supervised emergency procedures.

Next, after depressurizing the



It's Buster Butt,  
Spad driver,  
prepared to fly!



aircraft and vectoring over water for safety purposes the flight engineer, with a safety line secured to him, tried to reach the nose wheel with a pole to push it into locked position. It wasn't long enough, so a second and third pole were spliced together, but this effort also failed.

The skipper decided to proceed to NAS Atsugi, Japan, and asked the Atsugi tower to assemble key people to assist in troubleshooting the problem. En route, the crew tried to hand pump the nose wheel down, but they were unable to achieve enough pressure to do so. A second squadron aircraft in the vicinity joined up and confirmed the nose gear was in a trail position. Sensing the passengers' concern, the third pilot on board calmly briefed the passengers on what was happening. Keeping them informed alleviated their anxiety.

Next, the crew put the C-121J in a series of dives, attempting to rock the nose wheel into locked position. A tech rep arrived in the tower and recommended the crew secure all hydraulic pumps, slow the aircraft, then turn

the pumps back on simultaneously, shifting the crossover valve to the emergency position. The theory was that the sudden surge of pressure might be enough to lock the gear down. This also failed.

After an hour and a half of troubleshooting, the CO requested that the runway be foamed for landing. It was decided to shift weight, in this case people, to move the center of gravity aft. The pilots would land on the main mounts and hold the nose up as long as possible. At touchdown, selected military personnel seated forward would walk (not run) aft to help keep the tail down and the nose off the ground. The tower had recommended a gear-up landing but the skipper rejected that option. He felt the crew could land and keep the nose wheel off the deck until forward speed fell off to about 50 knots.

The squadron's flight surgeon went from seat to seat briefing individuals on holding their heads down for the landing. An enlisted man was positioned in a seat beside each child and tasked with the safety of that child. Fifteen enlisted personnel volunteered for the forward seats. The CO recognized the risks in having people moving aft when the main mounts were firmly on the runway. He also knew that the flight engineer and radioman faced a special hazard, because at their positions near the nose gear they were subject to injury if the plan didn't work.

In the approach, the cockpit crew suddenly smelled something burning. The skipper called for an immediate landing. The burning odor faded but the flight was committed to land. The copilot was at the controls and expertly guided the transport to a firm, but not hard, touchdown at the 1,500-foot mark at 95 knots. He kept the nose high which lifted the C-121J momentarily a foot or so back into the sky. Both pilots held the yoke full aft and the copilot rolled in full back tab. The aircraft landed on centerline and slowed rapidly, and the personnel seated forward began moving aft. Rudder control was effective until the tail began to drag on the runway, grinding away the lower rudders. At 30 knots the pilots employed brakes to counter swerving motion. The tail stayed down and just as it looked like the *Super Connie* was going off the runway, it drew to a halt, resting on the main mounts and the tail.

Rescue personnel immediately swarmed around the transport and assisted passengers in disembarking. Crash crew personnel came on board to keep the weight in the tail. No one was hurt. The C-121J sustained minor damage.



#### **Grampaw Pettibone says:**

**Although this event happened years ago, the teamwork, cool thinking and professional flying demonstrated by this aircrew was first-rate and stands as a model for today's Naval Aviation personnel.**

Courtesy of Cdr. Ralph Dannettell, Jr., USN (Ret.), who experienced this "happy landing" on 3 May 1964 when he was CO of Early Warning Squadron 1.