

A Mountain Full of Trouble

At 0930 an HH-60H *Seahawk* crew was preparing for a Hellfire missile test shot at a test range. Meanwhile, the officer in charge (OIC) of the cognizant detachment received a call from a naval air station requesting a search and rescue (SAR) mission. A preliminary report indicated a civil aircraft had descended out of radar coverage in the vicinity of a mountain about 50 miles away. Subsequently, the missile shot was suspended due to inclement weather on the test range. The OIC and aircraft commander (AC) discussed options and agreed to accept the SAR mission with the intent of completing the missile test later in the day, if possible.

At the crew briefing, the AC stressed that in the event of inadvertent instrument meteorological conditions (IMC), the aircraft would execute a 180-degree turn away from terrain. The OIC and AC discussed crew selection and agreed the scheduled crew for the missile test was the optimal crew available. The AC, crew chief and second crewman were from the same squadron. The copilot was from another command, but was a mountain flying instructor with three years' experience in the area. He also had weapon program experience and was a Hellfire tactics officer. Both pilots had flown together the previous day. Prior to departure, the AC asked the copilot to be mindful of the crew's lack of mountain flying experience.

The *Seahawk* launched before noon and soon encountered changing weather conditions from marginal visual



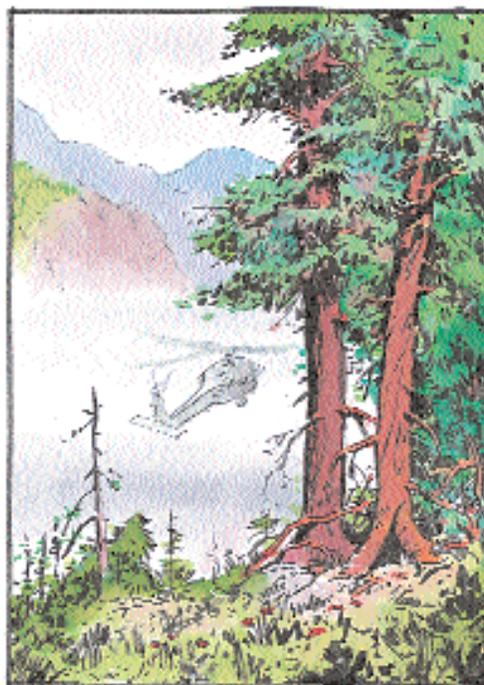
meteorological conditions (VMC) to areas of solid IMC. The AC maneuvered the helo to the eastern side of the mountain range where the missing aircraft might have been, but weather precluded transit to the SAR datum. After discussion with the crew, the AC decided a northerly transit would enable them to reach the datum. The crew experienced low ceilings and limited visibility but continued on.

The copilot took the controls for a period to allow the AC to rest. The

AC had experienced difficulty maintaining flight parameters and was twice cautioned by the copilot to keep his airspeed at 60 knots. Knowing the copilot had more experience in mountainous terrain, the AC eventually transferred controls to him. The helo continued the search, flying in and out of clouds.

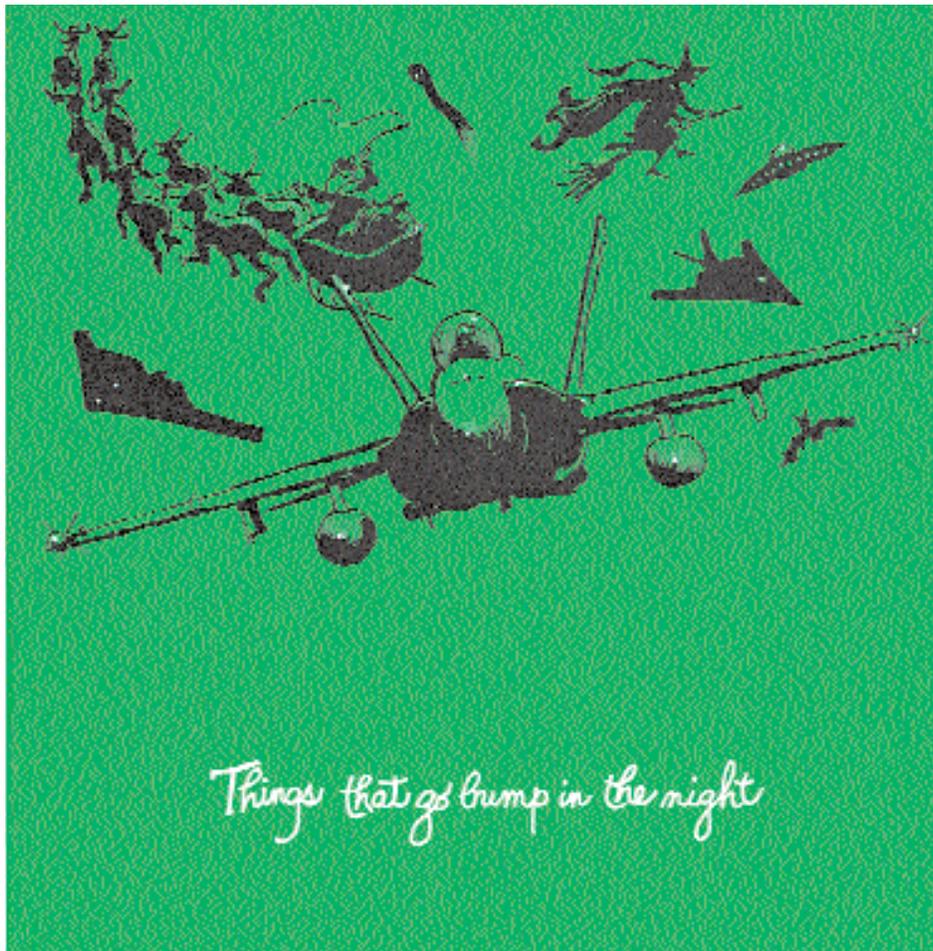
At one point, the AC cautioned the copilot to maintain an escape route. A little later, the AC advised the copilot that the weather exceeded his comfort level. The copilot acknowledged this and flew into more favorable conditions. The search continued for another 20 minutes.

The aircraft was contouring close to a mountain at 9,000 feet when it once again entered IMC. The AC announced he had lost visual terrain reference to the left. The copilot said he had terrain in sight and entered a 60-degree angle of bank to the right to stay VMC. He reduced angle of bank to 25 degrees and continued the turn 230 degrees, at which point the helo impacted the rising terrain of the mountainside. The aircraft bounced back into the air and struck the ground a second time, separating the cockpit from the fuselage. The cockpit tumbled and came to rest inverted, fatally injuring the copilot and a crewman who was seated on the floor of the cabin at the port aft window. He was attached by a gunner's belt to the helo, but the belt failed during the collision and he was ejected from the aircraft.



Grampaw Pettibone says:

Ole Gramps applauds the inclination to help in rescue



efforts, whether the party in need is civilian or military. But this crew did not get a proper weather brief and went scootin' off into the wild blue only to get caught in the goo. Motorin' in and out of clouds while "contouring" a mountain is too much like rollin' dice—for keeps. The AC briefed the crew that he would turn 180 degrees if the helo entered IMC. I know they were doin' their best to assist, but it woulda been better to reverse course, turn back for home and try again when the weather got better.

Nighttime Nightmare

A strike package comprised of 12 aircraft launched from the carrier, in sections, on a night strike familiarization flight. The aircraft were to conduct in-flight refueling, also in sections, before proceeding on the mission. Due to excessive traffic overhead the carrier, the

rendezvous point for one section of F/A-18 *Hornets* was altered by the section leader after becoming airborne. The two aircraft joined at a point 10 miles northwest of the ship and proceeded toward the tanker which was flying at 22,000 feet. Both pilots were wearing night vision goggles (NVG).

Established in spread formation with the wingman on the leader's left side, the flight maneuvered to a three-mile trail position behind a flight of three F-14 *Tomcats* also proceeding to the tanker. At this time a flight of three *Hornets* was also approaching the tanker at the section's 11 o'clock position about 12 miles away.

The section leader's wingman was spending 60 percent of his time monitoring traffic on radar and visually trying to assist the leader in joining up on the tanker. The flight closed to two miles in trail of the F-14s while the three-plane flight of F/A-18s was six miles ahead.

The wingman continued to devote most of his time to duties other than formation flying. The leader entered a descending 60-degree left angle of bank turn for 15 seconds. The wingman responded with a 35-degree angle of bank left descending turn. During this turn, a 24-degree heading difference developed between the two aircraft. The wingman was about 700 feet above the leader's altitude.

The wingman did not recognize the heading differential or the resulting closure rate. Both *Hornets* rolled wings level with a 21-degree heading difference and the wingman 300 feet above the leader. The wingman did not recognize the rapidly increasing size of the leader's aircraft due to scan breakdown and self-induced task saturation. The leader started an easy right turn, while the wingman continued a slight descent until the aircraft collided at a closure rate of

approximately 180 knots with a 17-degree heading difference. The wingman immediately initiated successful ejection, but the leader was killed on impact.



Grampaw Pettibone says:

It's a heckuva workload speedin' through the sky at night, wearin' NVGs and makin' your way to the tanker with a bunch of fast movin' birds in close company. The wingman lost situational awareness in this case because he was tryin' to do too much beyond his primary duty of flying as wingman. He violated a basic, fundamental task of formation flying: avoid flyin' into your lead.

Also, the flight did not brief for and subsequently did not use the air-to-air function of the tactical aid to navigation system, which mighta helped the fliers track their distance from each other. 'Nuff said.