

GRAMPAW PETTIBONE

Illustrations by *Ted Wilbur*

Mountain Mentor

Due to an error in the schedule writing process and personal neglect, the squadron's most experienced T-34C NATOPS evaluator launched solo on an out-and-in, although he was fresh from leave and out of currency to fly by himself. The pilot, who six months earlier had weathered a human factors board based on his declining level of professional effort, cancelled his IFR clearance and proceeded VFR shortly after takeoff. After performing several practice landings at two civilian airfields, the pilot continued northbound toward his intermediate stop, skirting ridgelines along the way. As the pilot started a turn around the final peak he focused his attention on the radio console. Just as he finished dialing in his intermediate stop's tower frequency, he felt the aircraft shudder. He immediately noted that he had developed a huge rate of descent. He pushed the throttle to its limit and tried to turn away from the oncoming mountain. Realizing impact was imminent, the pilot intentionally stalled the airplane, electing to land uphill instead of crashing downhill and potentially tumbling.



"I should get at least a DFC for this..."



The T-34 hit the rocky slope with almost no forward speed. The pilot managed to crawl out of the wreckage in spite of a broken hand and ankle. Perched above the crash site and away from a small fire that had started in some nearby vegetation, he attempted to use his PRC-90 but was unable to communicate over the ELT beacon. He managed to fire one pencil flare. Hurt, cold, and exhausted, the pilot waited for somebody to rescue him. A long time passed. The pilot wondered if he'd survive a night on the mountain.

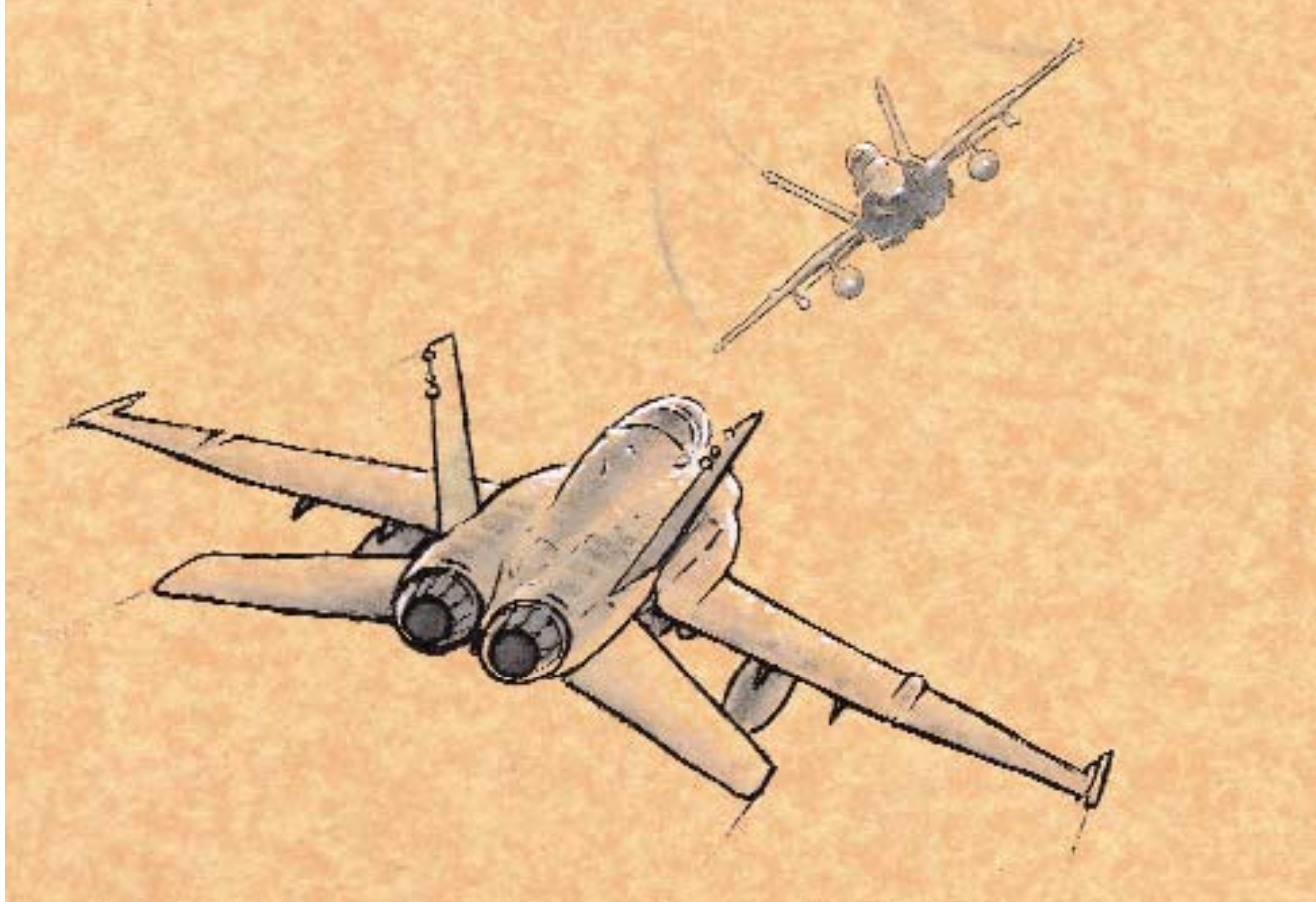
Several hours later a nearby forest fire observer saw smoke. He activated a U.S. Forest Service spotter plane that, in turn, found the crash site. Another plane dropped a line of fire retardant near the wreckage, inadvertently coating the downed pilot in the process. A medevac helicopter lowered a medic who administered first aid. As the rescue helo hovered above the pilot and medic, embers from the fire were blown onto the crash site, torching the stricken T-34 that had remained intact, for the most part. As the fire consumed the trainer, the pilot was hoisted off the mountain.



Grampaw Pettibone says:

Nothing burns my biscuits like this kind of breakdown in the way things ought to go. This guy had to be screaming "failing naval aviator" way before this little out-of-bounds adventure happened. Now I'm not trying to release this pilot from his own wing-wearing responsibility, but I am saying that sometimes a squadronmate is in serious need of what city folks call an "intervention." (I heard about it on the wireless once.)

Oh, well, all was not lost. At least this training mission resulted in some great training . . . for the U.S. Forest Service.



Dogfighting Disaster

Shortly before an ACM brief was scheduled to begin, three squadrons participating in an exercise modified their flight schedules in order to combine two sequential range events into one. The new mission had two F-5s and three F/A-18Ds in the Red Air role against four F-16s. The mission commander, who was the WSO in the lead Hornet, led the Red Air brief. Although the mission commander reviewed a tactical scenario that had the aircraft separating into three elements, he failed to brief a thorough deconfliction plan. The Dash-3 F/A-18 pilot had flown an instrument hop that morning that he believed satisfied his ACM currency requirement; however, that was only his first flight in the last 30 days, which was good for the “one flight in six days” requirement but five shy of the “six flights in 30 days” requirement.

During the flight, the three Hornets executed the separation maneuver as briefed. The Dash-3 F/A-18 blew through the merge with the Blue Air F-16s without radar contact or a tally, but several seconds later turned back into the fight based on a GCI call. Meanwhile, the other two Hornets had good radar pictures and began to descend.

Dash-3 followed the GCI information to another merge, and this time the pilot got a tally on the lead Blue Air F-16 above and to the right. He started an aggressive climbing turn that happened to be directly into the sun. At the same time, the lead Hornet pilot reefed his fighter into a descending left-hand turn to prosecute an attack on the lead F-16. Moving in for a rear quarter missile shot, he then reversed his turn into the flight path of Dash-3,

who he'd been belly-up to during the last half of the attack on the F-16. The starboard wingtip of the lead Hornet sliced through Dash-3's canopy, instantly killing both aircrew. The jet eventually impacted the desert at more than 500 knots, while the lead Hornet managed to recover safely at the detachment air base.



Grampaw Pettibone says:

Let's a-check the recipe here: Blend one last minute change to the flight schedule with one less-than-stellar brief. Mix in at least one non-current pilot. Add nine jets and stir into a fur ball. Oh, and throw in a pinch of bright sun. Yep, that's mid-air stew, all right.

I've jawboned on it before and I'll do it agin' until brownshoes start learnin' from those what made the same mistakes before 'em. Training rules—including currency requirements—ain't optional. And any mission that includes planes sharing pieces of sky has got to include altitude block assignments and conditions for leaving those blocks.

Gramps knows there are few things as hoot-makin' as a many-v-many, but for all of their gouge turnin' and burnin' potential, few training missions can rival 'em in their ability to bite you when you're not looking (literally). In this case, banking on the “big sky, little jet” theory once again proved itself an unwise investment.

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