

GRAMPAW PETTIBONE

Illustrations by *Ted Wilbur*

CAS-tastrophe

A Hornet squadron had developed a pervasive “hack it or pack it” mentality that had split the command pilots into two camps: those who were willing to risk breaking the rules and claim “no harm, no foul,” and those who stuck to the guidelines delineated in NATOPS, OPNAV 3710, the squadron SOP, etc. The “skipper’s boys” were in the former category. A few months after the skipper’s relief, the command climate had not gotten any better.

One evening, two of the pilots briefed for a night vision goggle, close air support mission working with an airborne forward air controller as part of an Air Force exercise over mountainous terrain. The brief included the fact that the weather was questionable, and a backup mission was discussed. The brief also reviewed the terrain elevation over the operating area but failed to review the elevation over the holding area.

After a normal launch and “goggle up,” the section of Hornets checked in with the airborne forward air controller (FAC(A)) as they continued their climb to the



air tasking order assigned altitude of 13,000 feet. At 10,000 feet the flight went IMC, and the flight lead asked the FAC(A) for a lower holding altitude. The FAC(A) responded, “Try 8,000 feet.”

The flight lead had already started his descent when the wingman asked if he knew the terrain elevation under the holding area. The lead replied, “Not off-hand, but I can see the terrain and we are well clear.” Neither pilot had the exercise area chart on board—an item they were required to carry.



A minute later the flight lead lost sight of his wingman, who had dropped into an unbriefed radar trail. The flight lead assumed the wingman had dropped back because he was having trouble keeping sight in the haze, so he turned his strobe and navigation lights to full bright. Once they reached the holding point, the flight lead elected to start a left-hand turn, taking into account the high terrain to the west and the threat of spilling out of the range area to the south. He also noted the cloud buildups to the south and west.

The flight lead was several degrees into his initial turn in holding when the wingman transmitted, "Not to get in your cockpit, but I think we're supposed to hold using right turns." The lead rogered the call and reversed his turn back to the right. At that point the flight lead was at 7,900 feet MSL and the wingman was nearly 700 feet lower in a two-mile radar trail.

During the turn, the flight lead went IMC, so increased his angle of bank and transmitted his intentions of rolling out on a heading of 060 degrees. Turning through west, the flight lead's radar altimeter, set to 5,000 feet, went off. He reset it for 3,000 feet, as briefed. The wingman asked for the flight lead's heading, and the lead replied, "Passing through 360 now."

As the flight lead steadied up to the northeast, he noted that his air-to-air TACAN showed the separation from his wingman was five miles and opening. What he didn't know was the wingman had gone IMC as well, and had continued west to find clear skies while continuing his descent. The wingman finally broke out of the clouds at just over 6,100 feet MSL—one hundred feet below the crest of a mountain less than a mile in front of him. He commanded full aft stick but it was too late. The Hornet hit the mountain and was destroyed; the pilot was killed.

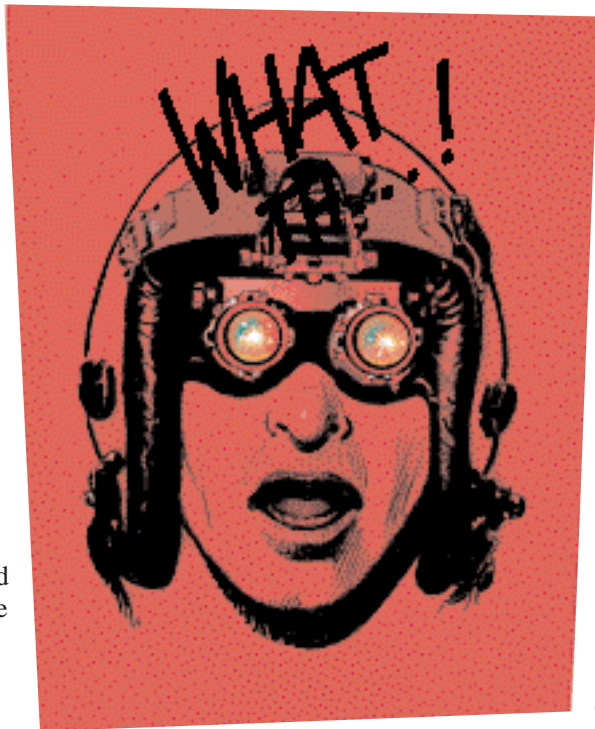


Grampaw Pettibone says:

"Hack it or pack it," huh? What the heck does that mean? Sounds like something one of them wannabes might say to you at an airshow when they're trying to impress you with what all they know. Well, here's another saying, one I recommend Brownshees actually take to heart: "Brief the flight; fly the brief." 'Nuff said.

Phrog Phoul-up

Two H-46s were working the FCLP pattern at night. All aircrew members were wearing night vision goggles. As the wingman troubleshooted a problem on the practice LHA deck, the lead aircraft executed several landings with each pilot taking a turn at the controls. On the third trip around the pattern, the H2P had the controls. Passing



the 180-degree position on the downwind leg, just as the H2P started the turn toward final, the HAC realized they hadn't secured the anticollision lights, the normal procedure once the aircraft entered the pattern. He reached out to secure the lights, but was unable to reach the appropriate toggle switch because he had positioned his seat fully down and aft. The HAC attempted to flick the switch aft using his kneeboard but hit the cockpit dome light switch instead, flooding the cockpit with non-NVG compatible red dome lights.

The H2P instantly lost all outside reference just as he was beginning a descending, decelerating left turn toward final. Rather than scanning his

instruments, the H2P continued to look outside the cockpit. He did not communicate any concerns to the HAC. Meanwhile, the senior crew chief, standing in the crew door, directed the other crew chief to go to the cockpit and assist the pilots in securing the dome lights. The junior crew chief had just started for the cockpit when the H-46 hit the river adjacent to the LHA pad at 70 knots in a nose-low, left wing down attitude. Only the senior crew chief survived the crash.



Grampaw Pettibone says:

Now Gramps has known an instructor or two over the years who liked to use their kneeboards for other than their intended purpose—heck, I even fought the impulse to chuck mine into the front cockpit at the occasional conehead what needed a fast erect, as it were—but I ain't never seen nobody try to use one as a switch flicker. But that having been said, a pilot's first responsibility is to aviate. If them magic glasses stop working for whatever reason, especially near the ground, you got to revert to good ol' fashion' gauge watching. And if that don't work, let the other guy take the controls.