

GRAMPAW PETTIBONE

Illustrations by *Ted Wilbur*



Not-so-Superman

An H-53 crew chief was in one of the work centers listening to some of his squadronmates talk about a stunt known as a “superman,” which involved aircrewmembers suspending themselves with a gunner’s belt fixed to the overhead safety cables above the helicopter’s rear ramp while in flight. The crew chief said he’d never done the stunt before but planned on trying it in the near future.

Just after launch a week or so later, the crew chief told his fellow aircrewmembers that he was going to perform the superman. The other two made no attempts to dissuade him from his plans but rather advised him to safety wire the quick release lever on the gunner’s belt to prevent a possible inadvertent release.

With the H-53 in level flight at 500 feet the crew chief moved to the ramp and fastened the top hook of the belt to an overhead cable. He then detached his ICS cord and began crawling off the ramp on his belly. After taking a couple of pictures with her cell phone camera, one of the other aircrewmembers saw the crew chief was struggling. She rushed back to pull him into the cabin.

About the same time the copilot glanced in one of his mirrors and saw legs dangling. As he looked closer, he could see that the bootlaces were facing forward, which meant that the aircrewman was face down and not sitting on the ramp. The copilot asked the crew over the ICS if everything was okay. The aircrewman who’d taken the photo replied that all was okay and she was working on it.

Sensing a commotion, the other aircrewman disconnected his ICS cord and moved aft to join the effort, but the two aircrewmembers were unable to get the crew chief back into the cabin. The crew chief was now visibly struggling. The second aircrewman reconnected to the ICS in an attempt to tell the pilots what was going on

but the station he hooked up to didn’t have the pendant required to transmit.

The crew chief’s situation was rapidly going from bad to worse as he began to slip out of his gunner’s belt. The first aircrewman made a desperate call over the ICS for the pilots to slow down and descend, which they attempted to do. The two aircrewmembers frantically tried to get the crew chief back into the aircraft, grabbing at his flight suit, arms, and the straps of his survival vest.

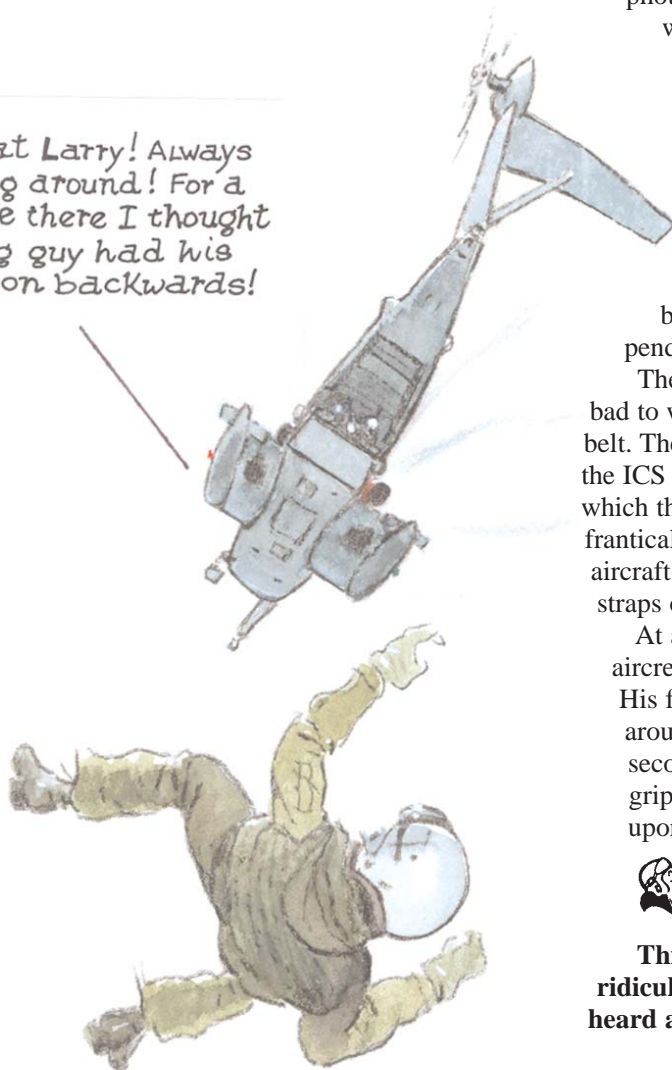
At approximately 130 feet over the water, the aircrewmembers saw that the crew chief was exhausted. His face had turned purple and the belt had slipped around his arms and was near his neck. A few seconds later his body went limp and he lost his grip on the aircraft. The crew chief was killed upon impact with the water.



Grampaw Pettibone says:

This has got to be one of the most tragic and ridiculous dang mishaps that Gramps has ever heard about. When did the business of aviating get

Oh, that Larry! Always kidding around! For a minute there I thought the big guy had his boots on backwards!



so easy that folks figured stunts like this here “superman” were reasonable? And, of course, the crew chief was the senior person in the cabin and therefore he should’ve been the one exercising good judgment, but in this case he could’ve used a cold slap of reality from the other two back there with him.

The next time you think about playing superman, think about the image of a falling crew chief—an image that will certainly haunt two aircrewmembers for the rest of their lives.

Hornet Hypoxia

A nighttime 4 v. 4 AIC mission launched from the carrier and proceeded to prebriefed CAP stations. During the rendezvous, one of the flight leads noticed his wingman was having difficulty joining up. After six minutes of trying to complete the rendezvous, the wingman transmitted, “I’m not feeling so good up here.” The flight lead asked the wingman if he wanted to descend and if he thought he was suffering from vertigo. The wingman replied, “Nah, I’m head is just, ah, all over the place, and my stomach is king of all over the place . . . I feel like I got a cold or something up here.” Again, the flight lead asked if the wingman needed to descend, to which the wingman responded, “I just need to take it easy.” Then the wingman told his lead that he was going to “hang out here while you guys press on with the fight.”

Because the tone and inflection of the wingman’s voice seemed normal, the flight lead assumed the wingman was dealing with some minor malady. The flight lead did as the wingman suggested and flew a couple of tactical intercepts against the other division. After the intercepts, the lead rejoined with the wingman, and all seemed normal until the wingman fell into an extended trail position.

The flight lead started a turn to allow the wingman to catch up. The lead also asked the wingman if he was ready to copy marshal instructions, to which the wingman responded, “Unable.” Based on his uncharacteristic communications and inability to stay in formation, the flight lead assessed his wingman was

suffering from severe vertigo. The flight lead told marshal his wingman needed special handling and recommended a section approach with minimal turns.

The flight lead positioned himself in acute parade on his wingman and asked if the wingman was ready to give him the lead. The wingman responded with “yes” and then “blind,” which made no sense to the lead. The

wingman then transmitted “visual” and “blind” repeatedly. Using his night vision goggles, the flight lead could see the wingman’s body flop forward and then sit up straight with his helmet resting against the headbox. The flight lead tried repeatedly to get his wingman to comply with marshal’s instructions to descend, but the wingman continued a right-hand climbing turn through 27,000 feet.

The flight lead finally assessed his wingman wasn’t suffering from vertigo but hypoxia. Because the wing aircraft wasn’t flying too erratically, the lead thought the wingman still had some measure of control over it. The flight lead began to emphatically address his wingman: “Wake up! I think you’re hypoxic,” and “Get your nose down!”

The wing Hornet continued a climb to an apex of over 35,000 feet. At that point, the flight lead thought the wingman might have regained control, but his hopes were dashed as the wing fighter’s nose dropped below 70 degrees low. The flight lead continued to make calls to the wingman, but they were for naught. The wing Hornet impacted the water and the pilot was killed.



THEN SUDDENLY, WAYNE
FELT THE ONSET OF AN
ANXIETY ATTACK...



Grampaw Pettibone says:

In my estimation there was too much assessing and not enough action going on here. O’ course, assessing the condition of a wingman can be a judgment call, sometimes, but when an otherwise sharp fellow starts sounding like the guy at the end of the bar after a few cool pops, it’s time to get him below 10,000 feet without delay. And those of you out there who think the oxygen mask is optional need to think again. Rules is rules. And I don’t need to tell you agin’ how they got to be so, do I? I didn’t think so. ’Nuff said.