

GRAMPAW PETTIBONE

Illustrations by Ted Wilbur

Museum Delivery Disaster

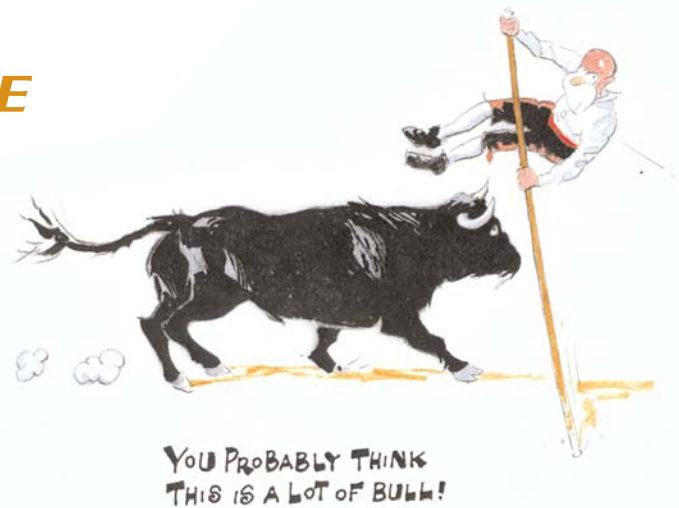
A Hornet squadron's final mission before deactivating was to deliver a jet to an airfield so it could be instated in a nearby museum. The field's runway was only 4,279 feet long and had no arresting gear permanently installed. The squadron had no SOP guideline on minimum runway length allowed without arresting gear.

The squadron CO took the mission. Despite advice from a handful of peers and wing staff not to fly into a field without arresting gear installed, the skipper pressed on with the planning.

Prior to launch, the aircraft displayed an antiskid caution. The CO cycled the switch, which cleared the caution, so he continued. The mission started with a photo op, a tactical low level, and a fuel stop at a stopover field. During the stopover, the antiskid caution light illuminated again, and once again, cycling the switch seemed to clear the problem.

Once at the final destination, the CO took the Hornet around for three touch-and-goes before requesting a full stop. On final approach, the pilot noticed that the anti-skid caution light was on again, but he attempted a full-stop landing anyway.

The Hornet touched down but didn't slow down as the pilot applied the breaks. (The F-18's brakes don't function with an antiskid failure and the antiskid switch on.) The CO neither deselected antiskid nor elected to



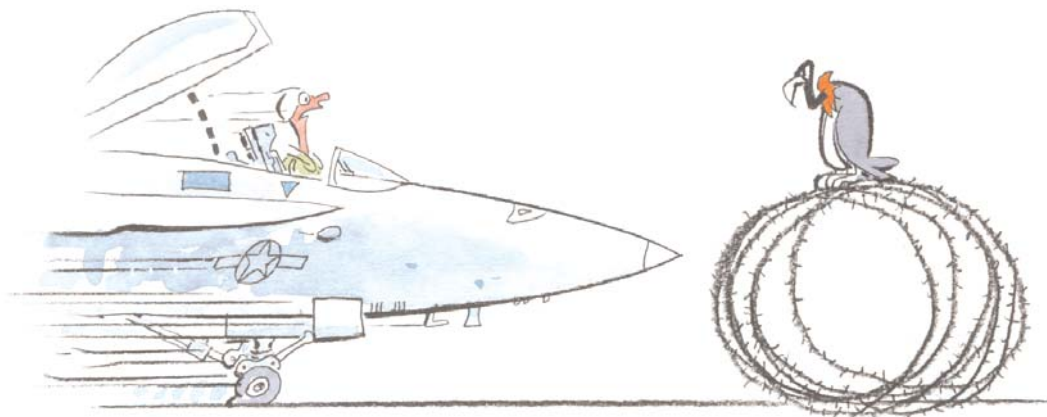
take off again, despite the fact that he had enough runway left to safely do so.

With 500 feet of runway remaining, the skipper shut the engines down. A few seconds later the Hornet left the runway. As the fighter hit a perimeter fence, the pilot ejected—but not before several strands of barbed wire wrapped across the cockpit. During the ejection sequence, the CO's right arm broke in two places and his left arm was badly gashed.



Grampaw Pettibone says:

Tarnation! I'm sure the museum weren't too happy with the condition of their new display once it showed up. Gramps has seen better headwork from ensigns in the flight gear issue line Day One at P'cola. This pilot was way too senior to be ignoring (or to be ignorant of) procedures like this. This kind of performance is worthy of a museum, too, but it sure ain't one you'd find on a military base.



The skipper always knew that the runways of Heaven are endless. Not so at the Hornet haven based on the terrible terminal isle of PRANGO-BANGO!



Gramps from Yesteryear

Hornet Hit

A four-plane flight of F/A-18 Hornets was on a strike fighter advanced readiness phase (SFARP) training mission—a night, radar, “opposed” (by adversary aircraft) forward-looking infrared sensor strike mission—which is very demanding and requires a high level of aircrew proficiency. The mission commander was an A-6 Intruder transition pilot on his first Hornet tour. He had flown eight hours in the last 30 days, 1.3 hours of which were at night, and one hour in the last seven days. The squadron had been on a reduced turnaround cycle and had been unable to fully conduct the usual predeployment proficiency training.

The mission commander assigned another pilot, Dash 1, to brief and lead the flight. The mission commander flew as Dash 3 on the leader’s port wing. The flight proceeded to the working area and using a “fluid four” formation, established a 500-knot ingress airspeed toward the target.

Dash 3 began experiencing lateral position errors relative to Dash 1 and made numerous heading corrections to stay in position. This was probably due to the reduced lighting conditions and/or possible awareness of an oncoming bogey flight which was about 40 miles away.

At one point, according to others in the formation, it appeared that Dash 3 was trying to cross under Dash 1’s aircraft. In addition, Dash 1 inadvertently slowed to 460 knots. This, combined with Dash 3’s 20-degree deviation from course, established a collision bearing

that went unnoticed.

Dash 3 started to make a radio transmission, but it was interrupted as the two aircraft collided. Dash 1’s port wing impacted Dash 3’s cockpit/turtleback area. Dash 3’s aircraft broke into three parts and exploded. The pilot did not eject and was lost. Dash 1’s Hornet broke into two sections, but the pilot successfully ejected.



Grandpaw Pettibone says:

God dang it! You could almost see this one comin’ before the flight got off the ground. Dash 3 was put into a position that just might have been beyond the necessary experience level at this point in the syllabus. The SFARP mission is one of the toughest to execute, especially because it’s played out in the dark and at high speed.

Naval Aviation owns the night, the saying goes, as epitomized by Operation Desert Fox. We MUST train for night, but lost situational awareness rears its deadly head at will, particularly after sunset and before sunrise.

In this case, it would have been better, the investigators noted, “to limit the complexity of tactical planning, employment and execution to a level commensurate with aircrew proficiency.” That’s not easy to do, but we’ve got to do it. The compressed turnaround cycle was surely a factor in this tragedy.