



# GRAMPAW PETTIBONE

## Three Hitch-Hikers

(Editor's Note: When Gramp brought in this story a few days ago, he said, "Here's an accident account that I've been carrying around in the back of my head for seven years . . . that's long enough." Perhaps when you read it, you will understand why he waited so long to write it up for N. A. News.)

This is the story of three fellows who had a newly-won war behind them. Their main interest was in getting home as quickly as possible. The railroads were jammed with service men bound for



various places in the East; commercial airline tickets were as scarce as hen's teeth. Of the three, one was a pilot on his way home for release to inactive duty, another an aviation radioman. The third and youngest of the group—a ship's cook with 15 days leave and a big urge to spend as much of it as possible in his home town.

They met for the first time at the operations desk of an air station in the Pacific Northwest. They had little in common other than their mutual desire to move either south or east. For the better part of a day it looked like they were stuck. A PV-2 was waiting to head out for an airfield in California—in fact, it had been there for a couple of days—but the weather was too rugged. The crew of the PV consisted solely of a pilot who was familiar with the plane, *but had no instrument ticket*, and a co-pilot, who had an instrument ticket, *but no experience in PV's*.

One of the hitch-hikers was about to give up the idea of catching a flight and get out on the highway. To this end he had just finished rearranging his luggage, when the loudspeaker said: "Any South bound passengers report to Operations."

This was the break they had been waiting for—if they could just get out of this hole, perhaps they would have better luck at a larger air station.

It's doubtful that any of the three inquired as to the pilot's qualifications, or asked just how much the weather had improved.

The takeoff and climb-out was normal and the flight continued in a southerly direction without incident for about 45 minutes. The hitch-hiking pilot went forward and got the word that the flight had been cleared on top. According to the pilots, the weather would be pretty good at the other end of the line, so he set about figuring out a way to keep warm. The flight had leveled off at 11,000 feet.

A few minutes later he noticed that they were climbing again and when he went up towards the cockpit a second time, they were up to nearly 16,000 feet trying to stay on top. The pilots thought that they would be over the high stuff in a few minutes—long before they really began to need oxygen.



A half hour later with the altimeter registering close to 16,500 feet the PV went through the tops of some clouds and broke out in the clear again, and then was suddenly back in the soup. They next thing they knew the plane was in a turn and then apparently in a dive and one engine began to race. The pilot and co-pilot groggy from lack of oxygen and short on experience were struggling to bring the plane under control.

At one time the airspeed hit 270 knots and when the PV was back in level flight again, the starboard prop was malfunctioning. With the throttle way back, the starboard tachometer was indicating 2700 RPM. They watched while the pilot feathered the engine and tried to settle down on a heading that would take them back to the field from which they left less than an hour before.

Someone asked the altitude of the mountains in the area and a glance at the charts showed that they ranged up to

nearly 10,000 feet. The PV-2 at this time was just a shade above 11,000 and not quite holding its own. Everyone had the same wish—that the weather would just clear up a little so they could see where they were going and how close the mountain tops were. The pilot seemed to be a bit steadier now and ordered the hitch-hikers to put on their chutes and be ready to jump, if necessary.

The hitch-hiking pilot began to take stock of the situation and volunteered some advice to the others as they adjusted their harnesses. "If we have to jump", he said, "let's go out *one-two-three* so that we'll be together when we land."

As the altimeter touched 10,000 feet, they looked at the pilot and then out into the grey nothingness that was all around them and then they heard the command: "BAIL OUT".

They lost no time in going out the rear door, pilot first, radioman second and the cook third. It was just like they planned—zing—zing—zing and when their chutes opened, they were close enough to shout to each other on the way down. The pilot was the first to break out of the overcast and noticed that they were coming down in mountainous and heavily-wooded country. He shouted for the others to cross their legs in case they should land in the trees, and before he knew it he found himself hung up in a tree—winded and shaken but uninjured. With some difficulty he managed to extricate himself and his chute from the tree and got down on what would have been firm ground, except for the fact that it was covered with nearly three feet of snow.





The pilot could hear the others calling and headed in the direction of one of the voices. It kept getting louder and louder and yet he couldn't find its owner. Suddenly and almost overhead he heard the frightened voice say, "You won't like it when you see where I am!" Looking up, he saw one of the boys dangling helplessly in his parachute harness nearly a hundred feet above the ground. The canopy was caught on the lone remaining branch of a dead tree much taller than those around it.

The pleasure in having located at least one of the others vanished as the pilot realized that there just didn't seem to be any immediate way of getting this fellow down. He tried to estimate how high he might be above the ground. He looked high enough for his chute to re-open in time to break his fall, should he jiggle himself loose—but maybe there was another way. He tried tossing a stone up over the branch thinking that perhaps he could make a rope out of the shroud lines of his parachute and manage to get it doubled over the branch. But even without the line and with a rock of just the right size he could barely reach the branch.

He asked the boy if he had tried climbing hand-over-hand up the chute to the branch, or if he dared try swinging himself over to the trunk. Both answers were negative. The cook had only one idea, "Go for help."

The pilot shouted up that he had no idea where they were or of how long it would take to get help, but the boy in the tree could think of nothing else. He insisted that he wasn't strong enough to climb up the chute and that he might jiggle it loose trying. He kept repeating, "Go for help, I'll be all right. Go for help."

The radioman whose voice they had been able to hear earlier could no longer be heard. The pilot shouted to him as did the lad in the tree. No answer.

Perhaps help was nearby, perhaps the other fellow had landed near a road and was already trying to get help.

It was nearly three o'clock in the afternoon when the pilot decided that the lad in the tree was right—the best thing to do was to go for help—quickly—before it got dark.

Even with the overcast, which stretched down to within a few hundred feet of the tree tops, he thought that he could determine which was west. In any event, he could start out by heading down-hill as there was more likelihood of finding a road in the valley.

He had taken a short course in survival training and he cautiously rolled up his parachute and started out with it under his arm. After he had been working his way through the three-foot snow drifts for what seemed like an hour, he heard the chap in the tree calling to him. He stopped and listened and he could hear just enough to know that he was calling for him to come back.

This called for a decision. He was sure that the fellow must still be in the tree or he wouldn't have been able to hear him at that distance. He could still think of no way to get him down. To go back would waste two hours. If he kept on, there was the possibility of finding help in the hour that remained before darkness. He decided upon this course of action. An hour later when it was evident that this was not going to occur, he selected a fairly sheltered spot, cut a few boughs for a windbreak and a bed and wrapped himself up in his parachute for the night. He was exhausted and sleep came quickly.

The next morning the weather was somewhat better and he was able to continue his westward trek. Despite aching muscles and lack of food, he was in pretty fair spirits—surely he would find help soon.

That was what he kept thinking all morning and hoping for all afternoon as he pushed slowly through the snow and underbrush. But he found nothing that day—and nothing the next day. On the third full day, it was hard to keep up hope when there seemed to be so little chance of finding anything.

In fact everything about the three days was hard. Each day required tremendous physical endurance, and time after time there were decisions to make which demanded intelligence and courage. Somehow the pilot managed to make the right decisions, took excellent care of himself and kept heading west.

On the evening of the third day after the bail-out, he came upon a ranger's shack, boarded up for the winter. He pried his way in knowing that the shack would afford shelter for the night and hoping to find some food. Inside he

