



GRAMPAW PETTIBONE

Real Squeaker

A flight of three A-4B *Skyhawks* (A4B) were launched early one morning from their home CVA for a short flight to the beach. From a coastal air station in Japan, they were to perform a navigation flight to a target area in South Korea, release a practice bomb on the target and return to the ship.

The entire flight went off pretty much as planned. A low level run-in was made to the target and loft bombing completed. Then all three aircraft climbed to 38,000 feet for the return leg to the ship.

They passed through multiple layers of clouds on the climb-out, but all layers were scattered to broken and weather presented no difficulty whatever. The in-flight visibility was excellent. The wingmen maintained a very loose position, flying one mile abeam and stepped up approximately one thousand feet on the leader.

The No. 3 man, on the leader's starboard wing, noted that he was falling behind and increased power to 99%, easing the nose over to pick up some airspeed. As he closed up alongside, he eased the nose up to resume his stepped-up position and noted an immediate five per cent loss of RPM. Lowering the nose again didn't help regain the lost power, nor did throttle movement. He was rapidly falling behind the other two planes by now, so it wasn't just a gauge failure.

He decided to switch to manual, so he pulled the throttle back to a half-way position and threw the switch as the RPM was coming down. There was an immediate loud THUD which shook the whole aircraft, followed by three more violent thuds! Figuring he had compressor stalls, he shut the engine down, switched back to primary, hit the airstart switch and brought the throttle back around the horn. No light.

He glided on down, told the rest of the flight of his difficulty and tried several more airstarts, using the check



lists this time. No luck again and it didn't look good. The engine sounded like a bucket of loose bolts rattling around—must have been really chewed up back there.

After passing through three cloud layers and while still at 17,000 feet, he spotted the ocean below and ahead of him, and an airfield in a small valley surrounded by rugged mountains behind him. Since he wasn't wearing an exposure suit and the water temperature was probably too low for com-

Its too HAIRY for words!



fort, he turned back toward land and the airfield.

The terrain below looked mighty steep and rugged. He'd lost his flight during the letdown, and there'd be no one to spot him for rescue later. More and more cloud cover pretty well obscured the terrain as he descended, and he mulled over the NATOPS and squadron SOP's which called for ejection at 10,000 feet under the circumstances he was facing. He sure hated to eject, though.

He decided to try a flameout approach to the airfield! He hadn't practiced any and had no contact with the tower, for his calls on guard channel brought no response, but he was positive it could be done. Besides, his RAPEC seat would bail him out of almost any situation.

He hit the 180 position at 5000 feet and 240 knots, with gear up, flaps and hook down and brakes out. At the 135° position, he had 4000 feet and 230 knots and lowered his landing gear. His altitude looked O.K., but too much airspeed was going to make him land long. As he rolled into the groove, he retracted the brakes and pushed the nose over, trying to aim for an earlier touchdown. That runway sure looked shorter from this position! No one on the field either—looked deserted.

His rate of descent was tremendous and he had to break his glide at 5-600 feet and flare, still hotter'n a pistol. He set the *Skyhawk* on the deck at 200 knots about 3500 feet down the 6600-foot runway and held it on forcibly with stick full forward.

Heavy braking had absolutely no effect, so with the runway end coming up fast, he locked the brakes and started sliding. As the stricken plane rocketed off the end zone, and while still rolling at over 100 knots, he ejected!

The seat worked as advertised and at the top of its trajectory tumbled over backwards. As he swung over

hanging upside down, he could see the plane moving across a rice paddy below. A moment later he was thrown clear of the seat and, with eyes closed because of the wind blast, was about to pull the "D" ring when he felt the opening shock of the chute. Opening his eyes and looking down, he found he was parallel to the ground in a prone position, face down and moving at a high rate of speed feet first.

Almost immediately he struck the ground, hitting flat and face down in a rice paddy. There was no real impact at all and, although his face was under three or four inches of water, he found he could breathe. His mask was still delivering bail-out oxygen.

Getting to his knees in the mud, he undid the right rocket jet fastener and was reaching for the left when the chute billowed and he was dragged through the mud face down for ten feet or so. Finally getting rid of the chute, he stood up, not even scratched. The next couple of hours was spent getting the wreckage guarded, pictures shot, classified gear removed. The field he had tried for was old K-9.



Grampaw Pettibone says:

Great jumpin' Jehosophat! Over-confidence and ignorance darn near 'bought the farm' for this young man! A flameout approach is a so-so thing unless you're sure of the field and its equipment, have tower communications and have recently practiced flameout approaches. Since flameout practice is *not* allowed, there should be *no* question when ejection conditions are present. Use the seat under *optimum* conditions, not as a back-up for a squeaker like *this* one. If the plane had piled up sooner and gone up in smoke, he'd have been one singed chicken.

There's no substitute for knowing and using properly all emergency procedures. A relatively minor emergency switch from primary to manual fuel control at high altitude was mishandled into a major catastrophe.

Dead Wrong

An A4D pilot had been scheduled for a cross-country trip from his East Coast air station to MCAS YUMA. Purpose of the trip was to establish advance liaison with scheduled refueling stops for a full A4D squadron, all set to follow him in a few days. He was carrying starter probes and miscellaneous

maintenance items in a converted drop tank, and each planned fuel stop for the squadron movement was to be provided with the equipment and instructions necessary for proper servicing.

The first leg of his trip was uneventful, but as the pilot made the necessary liaison contacts at a Midwest base, rough weather was rapidly building up to the North and West. Two teletype severe weather warnings had been issued, and the local air base had issued one as well. All the weather was between him and El Paso, his next scheduled stop.

Base weather personnel informed him that severe thunderstorm activity was forecast, surface winds to 65 knots in gusts, very large hail and tops to 55,000 feet. To the North of his course, tornadoes were forecast. Not a very pretty picture to contemplate. The weather at El Paso was excellent and forecast to remain so.

On the strength of the destination weather and being a real get-it-done type, he didn't secure, but haunted operations and meteorology for the next seven hours hoping for a break in the weather.

The forecast weather developed as predicted and kept moving eastward in waves, with new build-ups continually forming. Extreme turbulence was now reported.

He filled out a DD175 after the first four hours, but threw it in the trash can after observing the thunderstorm activity on the base radar.

Finally, about 1730, he filed IFR at 35,000 feet to El Paso, straight through the middle of the storm belt, got another weather briefing, had another

quick look at the radar scope (no change) and took off, fueled to maximum capacity, at 1856 CST.

At 1911, he reported breaking out on top at 35,000 feet and followed this up with routine position reports up to 1931 CST. At 1935, a preliminary call by him to Wort Worth radio was abruptly terminated; and at 1937 the A4D dug a 30-foot crater in the ground, evidently striking in a near vertical dive. The pilot rode it in. At the time of the crash, the area was being deluged by a severe thunderstorm. He hadn't made it.



Grampaw Pettibone says:

Great balls of fire! Whatever possessed this man, an experienced pilot with over 4900 flight hours, to push into a solid wall of thunderstorms and hope for a hole to appear magically will never be known. We've lost four planes and three pilots to storms in this same area in 60 days and stressed quite a few surviving aircraft to the maximum.

One man, who ejected successfully, died of loss of blood caused by hail punctures before he was located by a rescue party. Today's aircraft cannot consistently take what old Mother Nature can dish out in severe thunderstorms. Even if you disregard the intent of CNO that deliberate flight into published severe weather areas not be attempted or permitted; even if you disregard your almost total inability to maintain heading or altitude; and disregard also the fact that this renders IFR altitude or directional separation worthless; the personal risk and odds on the need for ejection or bailout are too great. It's not a game of "chicken" you're playing, it's for keeps.

