



GRAMPAW PETTIBONE

Decision Point

The all-weather attack squadron was in the process of deploying to a desert base for weapons qualification. The planes and crews departed from home base individually in order to obtain high and low altitude navigation training en route.

Late in the afternoon after completing refueling at a mid-continent naval air station, the A-6A *Intruder* and its crew of two lined up on the 7,300-foot runway for takeoff. With the checklist complete, the pilot rolled out into position and ran up the engines. He read off the instrument readings to the bombardier/navigator (BN) and noted that the power trim was right on the mark. Everything looked perfect.

With 5,000 feet remaining on takeoff roll, instrument readings were still normal, angle of attack working, air-speed good, accelerating through 115 knots. Shortly, at about the 4,000-foot marker, there was a sharp explosion, and the aircraft swerved left just as it was becoming airborne.

The pilot immediately checked for fire warning and noted nothing. The BN then asked, "Is it going to fly?" Replying "No," the lieutenant closed the throttle and dropped the hook.

Maybe the airplane bounced or maybe the brakes were on. Whatever happened, the A-6 missed the chain arresting gear cable and continued toward the end of the runway at 100-plus knots. The BN blew the canopy off, but the pilot judged they were too slow for a successful ejection and decided not to eject.

As the intrepid *Intruder* left the end of the runway, the pilot thought he should get the landing gear up, but the overrun looked solid, so he decided to leave it down. One thousand feet of prepared overrun didn't slow the bird very much; it continued right on into the grass which was very soft from recent rains.



Sinking deeply into the mud and spraying it all around like a fountain, the doomed craft's nose dug in. The aircraft then pivoted about the nose and the right wing onto its back, pinning both crew members into the lower part of the cockpit.

Fuel from the ruptured starboard wing cell immediately ignited and the scene was engulfed in fire and smoke.

The ever-ready crash crew began responding as soon as they heard the loud noise from the engine and chased the plane as it careened off the end of the runway. As the first truck reached a point about 30 feet from the burning wreckage, it mired in the mud and could proceed no further. The turret equipment functioned properly, however, and the fire was suppressed with foam while the firemen began frantically digging for the pilot and BN.

Initially, there were only about six inches of open space between the cockpit ledge and the ground. The pilot's head was bent forward and pinned against his chest so hard that he couldn't talk and could hardly breathe. The fire fighters, using their hands and shovels to dig, freed the crewmen in about 17 minutes. The BN, who was severely burned by the continually reflashing fire, was freed

first. The pilot was finally cut loose and assisted in crawling out from under. Fire damaged the airplane beyond repair.



Grampaw Pettibone says:

Great horned toadies! Decisions! Decisions! And, oh my, what can happen if you make a wrong one! Seems the A-6 ingested a prairie chicken into the left engine just at liftoff. The craft would've easily flown away on one engine.

Why didn't he retract the landing gear as he went off the end of the runway? Why didn't they eject as soon as the arresting gear was missed? More decisions.

I don't want a second-guess the pilot. When it's decision time in the cockpit, there's no time for consensus. You figure it your way and I'll figure it mine. What we're all agreed on, however, is that those guys owe their lives to the outstanding, on-the-ball crash crew which responded so quickly and to the men who worked so hard under that burning airplane to free them from what most certainly would have been a fiery doom.

Back Seat Driver

The helicopter mission was to evaluate a new type of hand-held movie camera for film vibration. The flight schedules duty officer advised the pilot that he was to pick out a car and fly formation on it as they paralleled a long, low bridge. The photographer would take pictures of the car in relation to the stationary bridge. When the Ltjg. asked how close he should fly, he was advised to check with the photographers.

After preflighting his RH-3A *Sea King*, the pilot talked with the two photographer's mates who were setting up their equipment on the port side of the aft compartment. They stated that on previous missions they were out about 200 feet and no lower than the bridge guard rail.

With the photographers and crew strapped in or wearing gunner's belts, the RH-3A lifted off and headed for the bridge. Hovering over the beach, they completed all checks, picked out

a moving car and headed across the bay.

Five-hundred yards out, the pilot turned the *Sea King* over to his copilot on the left side. Several times during the five-mile transit, the photographer called, on the interphone, for the helo to move in closer as they weren't doing much good at that distance. The copilot was quite reluctant to do so as it seemed they were already close enough for safety.

As they reached the shore, the pilot took control again and spotted a semitrailer truck moving the other way. He immediately moved in parallel, and they headed back. The photographer again requested them to move in closer, then called back that it looked good. Five to ten seconds later the rotor hit a light pole along the bridge roadway.

The *Sea King* immediately began vibrating severely, and the pilot decided to make an emergency landing. He set the helo down on the water about 100 yards north of the bridge.

The engines were secured and the flotation bags deployed without incident; however, the helicopter began to drift under the bridge. The sea anchor was then deployed and, a few minutes later, two fishing boats came alongside. The fishermen agreed

to tow the H-3 1½ miles to shore where it was pulled aground by a police jeep. The *Sea King* suffered only minimum damage.



Grampaw Pettibone says:

Great horned toadies! Fetch me another aspirin tablet. Who in tarnation was in charge and flyin' that twirlie, the man in the right seat or the GIB (guy in back) takin' pictures? Was it really necessary to follow his direction to complete the mission? I sure hope not! It's a good thing they didn't crash on the bridge 'n clobber a few cars or trucks.

Ain't there somethin' in OpNav regs about flying in such a manner that no person on the ground could reasonably think that he or his property is endangered. *Flight Violation?* What's that?

Neglected Plea

The Marine captain instructor was making his final plans to be married and was to begin his leave late in the day. He had been up packing most of the previous night and, early in the morning, made a request through his department head that he not be required to fly that day. The training officer denied the request because of the student load; however, he said the captain would only have to fly one hop — instead of the usual two or three.

The groom-to-be was scheduled for



basic air work with an ensign in a T-28B *Trojan*. The flight proceeded without incident with the craft arriving back over the field right on schedule. The instructor in front had the stick and was cleared for a left-hand break. The tower advised him to watch for an H-53 helicopter which was making a GCA final.

They broke tight over the numbers, making a descending turn. At the 180 position when the captain called his gear down, he was again reminded of the H-53 — which was not yet in sight — but continued the descending turn to final. Then the student in the back spotted the H-53 under the right wing. The captain acknowledged his call and suddenly realized that they were over-banked and low. He quickly ducked down in the cockpit as the plane shuddered and rolled, inverted. The pilot added power just as the aircraft struck the ground.

The uninjured student crawled out of the wreckage — which luckily did not catch fire. The front cockpit was completely destroyed and the captain received fatal injuries.



Grampaw Pettibone says:

Who is going to carry the burden of *this* tragic mishap? The captain was so preoccupied he didn't even sign the yellow sheet before the flight. Preoccupation, get-home-itis and fatigue combined here to cause an accident that could easily have been prevented. A professional pilot should know better, but so should those in supervisory positions. The pilot involved is usually the last to admit that he shouldn't go.

