



GRAMPAW PETTIBONE

Helo Heroes

The four-man crew of two plus two made final checks as the EA-6B Prowler stole slowly forward in the dark winter night not fit for man nor beast. The pilot taxied into position on the #1 catapult, engaged the shuttle and hookup was completed.

The flight director signaled for full power. Tension was taken and the pilot acknowledged ready for launch. Bam! The stroke of the catapult – and the aircraft lunged forward into the dark night as its bonds to the deck were severed. Suddenly, a massive deceleration was felt as the catapult shuttle disengaged from the aircraft and raced forward to the bow. The pilot, realizing what had occurred, quickly pulled power to idle and applied hard braking. The crew, alert to the urgency of a possible ejection, waited a split second for the pilot's command to eject – all except one. In less than a second, the Number 3 ECMO seated in the right rear station pulled the handle and was ejected into the dark icy waters along the starboard side of the ship. The pilot, meanwhile, brought the aircraft to a safe stop after 125 feet of travel up the deck.

The duty plane guard helo was immediately dispatched to the vicinity of the downed aviator, established a hover, located the crewman and attempted a rescue. The pilot experienced severe difficulty trying to hover because of 35-40 knot winds, 15-20 foot sea swells and extremely low visibility. As the rescue swimmer was being lowered on the hoist, he was bashed by a large swell which ripped away his mask and fins. The rescue swimmer, now *in extremis*, was unable to reach the survivor. Repeated attempts to lower the "horse collar" to the survivor in the frigid water



I swear & promise that my 2 resolutions will be kept through out the year, with NO exceptions!

were unsuccessful.

Airborne at the same time was an HS-11 crew conducting antisubmarine warfare operations 10 miles west of the carrier. When informed of the ejection, the pilot, Cdr. Richard Catone, ordered his SH-3 crew to secure operations and rig for rescue as they proceeded to the SAR scene. Once at the scene, Cdr. Catone and his three crewmen assumed primary rescue responsibilities and began an exhaustive search for the crewman. With the use of a hand-held aldis spot lamp, Petty Officer Pearson spotted the survivor in the raging sea. Ltjg. Elder skillfully maneuvered the SH-3 helo into position to commence rescue as Petty Officer Pritchard quickly geared up for a swim.

Cdr. Catone then took control of

the aircraft as the intensity of high winds, extremely low visibility and total instrument conditions had rendered the automatic hovering capability virtually useless. Cdr. Catone established and manually maintained a hover over the bobbing victim with the skillful assistance of his copilot.

As Petty Officer Pritchard was lowered on the hoist, he timed the heaving sea swells, detached himself from the hoist and dropped into the icy water. He swam through the raging seas, fighting the elements, and located the survivor in the dark ocean waters. As Petty Officer Pritchard clutched the survivor, the intensity of the waves swept him 25 to 30 feet fore and aft as well as 15 to 20 feet up and down. From the helo hoist door, Petty Officer Pearson was able to direct vital control instructions to the pilot and maneuvered the hoist cable to place the rescue sling within reach of the rescue swimmer. After a fatiguing struggle, a successful hookup of both survivor and swimmer was effected. Petty Officer Pearson hoisted the pair aboard and detected that the victim was suffering from extreme hypothermia and shock. Cdr. Catone directed the crew to initiate first aid. He instructed both crewmen to open their wet suits and wrap their bodies around the survivor to provide life-saving warmth to the aviator who had been in the frigid sea for at least 45 minutes.

Grampaw Pettibone says:

Holy shivering survivor! This was a real chiller for a very lucky lad. Aside from being turned into a walking popsicle, after 45 minutes in icy water, he recovered with no ill effects.

Old Gramps has never been stranded in the open ocean, either day or night, but it's tough to imagine a more

desperate, frightening and sinking feeling than that experienced by this crewman. Equally difficult to describe must be the joy felt when he saw Petty Officer Pritchard come down the helo hoist to rescue him. As a matter of fact, Petty Officer Pritchard reported the survivor's first words were, "I love you! I love you!"

To say that this gent was lucky is

an understatement. The performance of Cdr. Richard Catone, Ltjg. Robert Elder, AW2s Timothy Pearson and James Pritchard was not luck but a real demonstration of superior airmanship, professional skill, courage and devotion in extremely hazardous conditions. In recognition of their performance, the HS-11 crew was awarded the 1981 Association of Naval Avia-

tion Outstanding Achievement Award for Helicopter Operations.

Gramps, on behalf of all aviators everywhere who have been or are potential dunkees, also salutes this crew. I can recall no finer example that portrays the motto of search and rescue crews — "so that others may live" — as in the case of this young lad. Good on you, gang!

