



How Do You Spell Relief?

The A-7 Corsair was readied for launch for a ferry mission to transfer custody of the aircraft to another squadron. This was the aircraft's first flight following an extensive corrosion control inspection in which all panels and all avionics bay components were removed, cleaned and replaced.

During the post-start checks, the aircraft's radios were found to be very weak and scratchy with volume full up, and the TACAN would not lock on in either azimuth or range. The pilot, an experienced A-7 driver (with 3,100 total flight hours), decided to continue with the launch. Following the catapult shot, he anchored VFR overhead the ship at 14,000 feet to await clearance to his destination ashore. Repeated radio checks with the carrier continued to be weak and garbled and the TACAN was confirmed to be inoperative.

The pilot climbed to 19,500 feet and proceeded VFR en route to his destination 150 miles to the south. He could not achieve radio contact with the flight center. However, he was able to receive faint transmissions from other aircraft. He switched to emergency IFF and could hear approach control acknowledge his code 7700 squawk.

The pilot sighted a large clearing in the cloud coverage over the area of his destination and made a visual descent to 2,000 feet while dumping fuel to 4,500 pounds. At level-off, he realized he was about 25 nautical miles northwest of the naval air facility. As he proceeded southwest, the cloud ceiling and visibility gradually lowered. He made landing checks and reduced speed to enhance his visual navigation.

The A-7 pilot continued to hear faint intermittent radio transmissions, including a report of rain in the vicinity of the landing field. Anticipating a possible landing delay, he raised the gear to conserve fuel and lowered the hook to prepare for a wet runway recovery.

In the meantime, another "no radio" aircraft was inbound to the same field and the tower had made several attempts to contact it. A U.S. Army helicopter reported sighting a Navy A-7 aircraft with gear down, possibly the "no radio" aircraft which they had been trying to contact.

Nearing the field, the A-7 pilot's attempts to contact the tower were unsuccessful. He heard a tower transmission referencing an emergency aircraft eight miles northeast of the field and erroneously assumed that the call referred to him. He continued heading southwest and descended to 800 feet to maintain visual flight. At two miles from the field, he was at 600 feet altitude in light rain.

Tower personnel initially sighted the A-7 at one mile east of the airfield and assumed it was the emergency aircraft with which they had made contact. The A-7 overflew the tower from east to west at 600 feet, rocking its wings, and then broke left to land on runway 19 (duty runway

was 01). Tower personnel then lost sight of the aircraft due to the low clouds and poor visibility. They regained visual contact as the aircraft turned through the 90-degree position and transmitted, "Aircraft turning on final, check gear down, you're cleared to land," and gave him a steady green aldis light. The pilot heard only a portion of the transmission. He acquired the meatball and touched down on centerline just short of the arresting gear. The hook engaged the gear and the aircraft came to rest seven feet right of centerline, with only one slight problem. The pilot had failed to lower the landing gear. The 1,000 feet of runout was on the belly of the aircraft.



Grampaw Pettibone says:

Holy abrasive arrestments! A wheels-up landing can ruin your whole day, gang.

This show started with the pilot's decision to continue the flight with the questionable aircraft, and gradually went downhill from there. Several factors contributed to the breakdown of normal habit pattern and ended in a grinding halt with the pilot's failure to execute the landing checklist and lower the gear. The wheels/flaps cockpit warning light was flashing but was unconsciously ignored by the pilot. Due to the poor visibility and radio difficulties, even this experienced pilot became overly preoccupied with locat-

ing the field, determining the duty runway and landing the aircraft. He did not hear the tower tell him to "Check gear down" when turning final, nor their call to "Go around" as he crossed the landing threshold. This call was blocked out by background noise. He had earlier turned off the guard receiver due to interference from a foreign station.

Quite often the discomfiting abrasiveness of a wheels-up landing can apply to some areas which are far more sensitive than the aluminum belly of the aircraft. And to use words of our good friend Roger Stauback, this is truly a case of where a couple of roll-aids (say la gear) would certainly have spelled relief.

