



Tight and Low

Returning from a midmorning bombing mission, the young *Corsair* pilot eagerly signed on to replace a cancelled pilot in the night-scheduled, two-plane practice bombing pattern. By nightfall, thunderstorms in the local and target areas altered the planned mission to two individual round-robin instrument training sorties. On the first leg, the pilot executed one TACAN and two GCA approaches, and then proceeded to home plate.

Weather at home field was 400 scattered, 1,200 broken, 2,500 overcast, with zero visibility in heavy thunderstorms one mile east of the field. The initial ACL approach to runway 27L was downgraded to a surveillance approach due to no radar lock-on in heavy rainstorm. With no visual contact, the pilot leveled at ASR minimums (360 feet, 1 mile), continued inbound and executed a missed approach. Passing the eastern field boundary, the pilot acquired visual contact and requested a turn downwind for a VFR approach. The tower consented, and advised the pilot to keep it tight to maintain visual runway contact.

The pilot turned downwind, climbed to 600 feet at the abeam position, was given clearance to land on runway 27L, and was advised of GCA traffic to runway 27R. In the approach, the A-7E appeared to overshoot, creating a potential midair with GCA traffic on 27R. The tower directed the A-7 pilot to wave off and advised him to keep it low to avoid a midair with the other aircraft now on GCA climbout.

He again climbed to the 600-foot abeam position, was cleared to land on 27L, and advised of a second aircraft on GCA final to 27R. Tower personnel lost sight of the A-7 just beyond the abeam position where it apparently entered a thundershower. Approximately five to six seconds later, they observed a large fireball as the aircraft crashed just beyond the 90-degree position.





Grampaw Pettibone says:

Jumpin' Jehoshaphat! What another needless waste of valuable man and machine! This young lad's anxiousness to go VFR right back into the goo he had just exited is bewildering. He obviously thought he could turn inside of it. And, in old Gramp's opinion, the tower's advice to keep it tight and keep it low may have just been the icing on the grim reaper's cake. Whether it was inattention, disorientation, or the pilot intentionally attempted to descend under the weather is of little consequence. The tally is just the same and just as fatal.

Phantom Fatality

A highly experienced F-4 pilot with over 2,500 hours in type and his junior RIO who had recently joined the squadron met for a missile brief with the pilot of an OA-4M aggressor aircraft. Rules of engagement for ACM were covered, noting the minimum altitudes of 5,000 feet AGL for high-air-speed and 10,000 feet AGL for low-air-speed maneuvers. The crews referred to a map of the operating area and noted terrain elevations in excess of 3,000 feet MSL. The minimum altitudes for high/low airspeed flight were not converted to MSL altitudes. The fighter and aggressor crews then attended a combined brief for all mission aircrews.

Immediately following the mission brief, the *Phantom* crews ate a quick lunch and filed the necessary flight plan. Because of the impending take-off time, they conducted a modified briefing without the NATOPS briefing guide, which did not include departure/spin recovery procedures. High and low airspeed minimum AGL altitudes were again briefed, but no conversion to MSL altitudes was discussed. Somewhat rushed, the *Phantom* crews manned their aircraft and took off three minutes ahead of schedule. Once in the operating area, the *Phantom* climbed to 10,000 feet

MSL for defensive maneuvering against simulated SAM threats, and was engaged by the aggressor OA-4M. With that, the simulated air battle was on.

During the exercises, the *Phantom* initiated a turn causing it to depart controlled flight, at which time the RIO called out near-zero airspeed. The drag chute was deployed and power set between 90 percent and military. The RIO continued to call out airspeeds. The pilot told the RIO to stand by. The *Phantom* stabilized at 80 degrees nose down, with increasing airspeed but with insufficient altitude for recovery. The pilot initiated command ejection at 6,000 feet MSL (3,800 AGL). The *Phantom* impacted the ground in an 80-degree dive at 210 knots and burst into flames under the descending crew. The RIO used the four-line release system to steer clear of the aircraft fire and landed about 500 feet from the crash site, but the pilot's parachute fabric melted due to the intensive heat from the flaming wreckage. The pilot sustained fatal injuries from the unretarded fall.



Grampaw Pettibone says:

Great balls of fire! Another sad and unnecessary loss of an experienced aviator and valuable aircraft. This mishap didn't just happen, it was caused. Violation of NATOPS and rules of engagement are just part of the problem here. While aggressiveness is desired and is a virtue in a fighter pilot, the urge to press the fight without adequate airspeed or altitude must be suppressed. It's a mistake and often a fatal one as in this case. Had this crew been aware of their proximity to the ground when the aircraft departed, they would still have lost the aircraft, but both may have survived. The pilot's decision to stand by and delay his ejection in an effort to save the aircraft cost him his life. This was another tragic case of "a highly experienced, best pilot in the squadron" pressing it too far. Gents, when your aircraft is in a situation with no recovery possible, then get out! As the well-known 1961 safety poster stated, "Know When to Go. THEN GO!"

