GRAMPAW PETTIBONE

Switches and Glitches

The EA-6B *Prowler* crew had flown together on their last 30 shipboard sorties and were well attuned to each other's habit patterns. After breaking at the bow, the aircraft decelerated below 250 knots as the pilot lowered the gear and flaps/slats handles. The pilot reported, "Gear and flaps coming," as the bird approached the abeam position, continuing to slow down.

Electronics countermeasures officer (ECMO) I, up front, calculated a 127-knot approach speed and verified that the slats had begun to extend. He then directed his attention to adjusting the air conditioning system.

ECMO II monitored airspeed. As it decreased to 200 knots, he looked over his shoulder to check that the slats were down. To his surprise, the wing was clean — both flaps and slats were full up. He rechecked airspeed, now 152 knots, then transmitted, "Flaps are up." The pilot reacted sharply, and added power. Adjustments were made as the engines spooled up. ECMO II, with some relief, saw that the flaps and slats were now down.

After landing, the crew calculated the actual clean stall speed of the EA-6B to be 152 knots at idle power and 140 knots at maximum power. Since the pilot usually reduced the throttles to 80 percent in the break, the *Prowler's* stall speed was about 146 knots, six knots below actual airspeed.

The crew had tested the emergency flaps/slats operation in flight but no one confirmed that the switch, which has three positions — up, off and down — was properly reset.

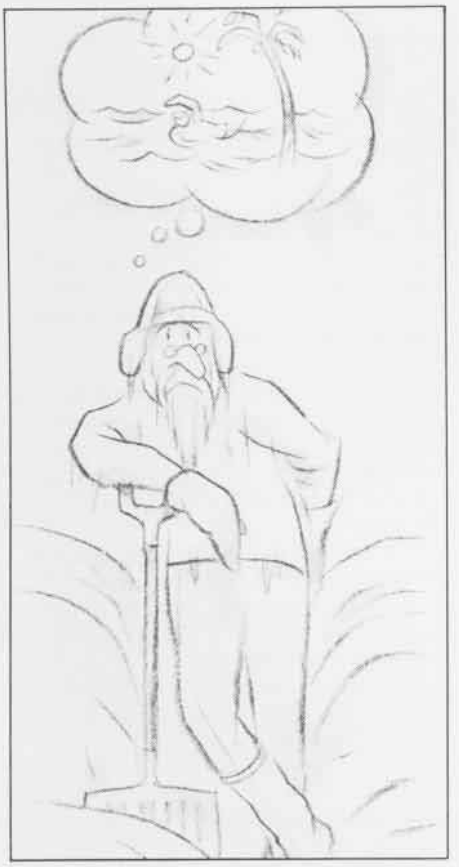
Since normal flaps are prevented from operating when the switch is in the up or down position, selection of normal flaps/slats was overridden by the electrical emergency flap drive motor. The *Prowler's* checklist does not specifically require a check of the emergency flap switch in "off" after the four and one-half minute emergency flap extension and retraction cycle.

Grampaw Pettibone says:

Good thing ECMO II made that quick call.

Shop talk in the ready room revealed somethin' that singed Ole Gramps' whiskers a bit. Another squadron aircrew had made the identical mistake the week before. But didn't tell anybody about it!

Lesson learned: Don't let pride stand in the way. Share your experiences, the good ones and the bad. Remember, we're all in this together.

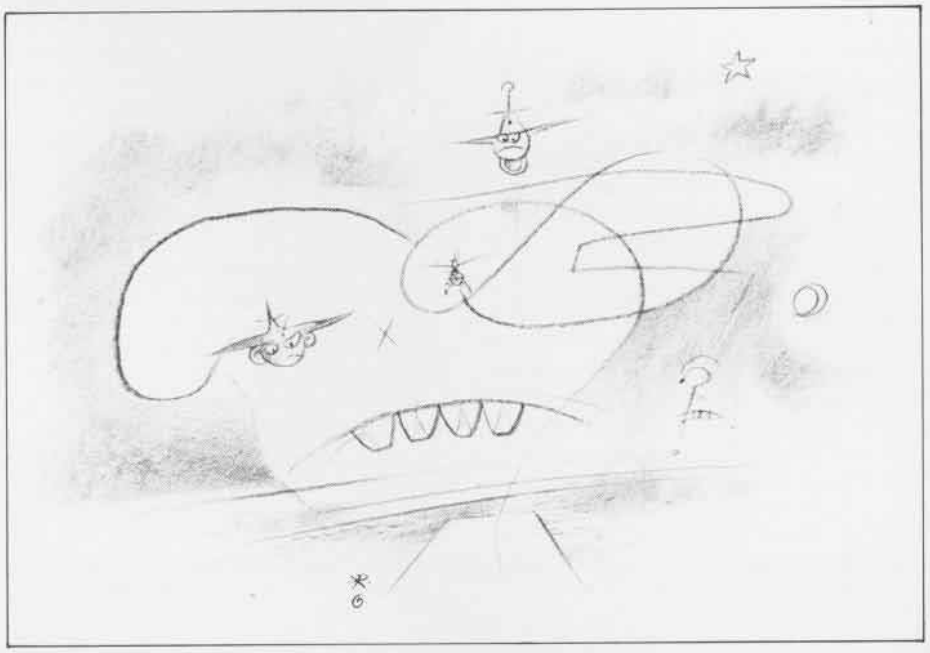


Formation Failure

An A-7 *Corsair II* made a righthand rendezvous on an A-6 *Intruder* abeam the carrier at 2,000 feet following launch for a night, war-at-sea exercise. Weather was 2,500 feet scattered; visibility ranged from three to six miles, although in some quadrants it was reduced to less than a mile at altitudes below 1,000 feet. Some observers said that a high, strong moon produced a milk bowl effect and a false sense of VFR.

The "starboard delta" rendezvous point was three miles from the carrier, which was used as a visual reference. Rendezvous speed was 270 knots. The *Corsair* was established in wing position. The lead, in the A-6, awaited a third aircraft to join the formation. After a time, the lead crew spotted a target thought to be the third plane, crossing from the 1:30 to the 11:00 position. Lead commenced a right turn, achieving an angle of bank that exceeded 30 degrees, to expedite the rendezvous and radioed the "third" aircraft to roll out on a northerly heading. There was no response to this transmission.

Lead began a descent and, at one point, passed within about 400 yards of and below the CV's plane guard helo, circling starboard of the ship. Not long after entering the rendezvous turn, and descent, the A-6 pilot and BN became distracted by the unexpected high closure rate and unusual light pattern on an aircraft ahead of them.



ILLUSTRATED BY Osborn

Both flyers scanned outside the A-6. Approximately 20 seconds passed without the lead pilot's making reference to the instruments. A SAR crewman in the plane guard helo saw the formation approaching his aircraft from the port side in a descent.

Passing through 1,000 feet, the BN initiated a UHF and ICS pull-up call. The transmission was not completed due to a malfunction that occurred after takeoff. The A-7 pilot on the *Intruder's* wing transmitted, "Check your altitude." Two seconds later, the *Corsair II* impacted what was later described as the glassy water, caught fire, bounced, and then settled into the sea in a ball of flame. The A-7 was destroyed, the pilot killed.

The *Intruder* executed a four-G pull at 300 feet, bottoming out at 100 feet, and climbed up to safety.

Grampaw Pettibone says:

Once in awhile, but only once in awhile, a Navy flyer — be he or she a pilot, NFO, flight engineer, whatever — can briefly relax while on duty in the air. Depends on the aircraft type, of course, how long those breathers last. Those who handle the tactical machines may get a break, say, while cruisin' at high altitude, autopilot on, bird trimmed up nicely, clouds few and far between, and all gear hummin' like those fancy computers I see in the offices around mine nowadays.

But most of the time, which means almost all of the time, there is no respite, especially for the folks in the fast, jet-driven jobs that often have to do their thing down low.

Those involved in this tragic accident knew that — and they weren't takin' a break. But they fell victim to a breakdown in scan patterns and crew coordination. They were well-rested, well-briefed and, except for the UHF difficulties in the *Intruder*, the aircraft were in good shape.

On the other hand, the A-7 pilot had flown one night formation hop a month before, but it was the only night form flight in the past five months.

Seems the *Intruder* was actually, and unintentionally, trying to join on the plane guard helo, thinking that it was the fixed-wing "third" aircraft. The moon effect and different ranges of visibility surely didn't help the crew. Neither did the inadvertent descent, later figured to be at 5,100 fpm.

The bottom line, though, is improper scan pattern. Workin' those eyeballs between the gauges inside and the world outside is an absolute, never-stop-doin'-it *must*, under such circumstances. The BN's supposed to lend a hand by keepin' an eye on attitude and altitude. His UHF problems didn't help the cause in this case.

Another thing: The pilot didn't reset the radar altimeter from 50 feet after launch. Keep in mind that exceeding 30 degrees of bank at night makes things hard on wingmen and also knocks the radar altimeter off the line in the A-6. So, there was a piece of gear on board that might have helped, if set up properly.

You wingmen out there, don't get lulled into a false sense of security. Look out for yourself while you're lookin' at the leader.

Ole Gramps knows these are worn out warnings. But worn out as they are, they ain't ready for the rag heap yet!

What Inspection?

En route to NAS West Coast, the crew chief on a *Skytrain II* was in the rear of the aircraft gathering his personal belongings when he spotted a transparent plastic shopping bag under a passenger seat. Closer inspection revealed a 16-ounce can of charcoal lighter fluid. Due to the pressure differential, the can had swollen in size considerably but was not leaking. The crew chief immediately placed the can in a double plastic bag to contain any possible leakage and stowed the package in a metal container, where it safely remained until the flight was completed.

Investigation revealed that a 16-year-old dependent, who had been processed through passenger screening at NAS "Pacific," brought the fluid aboard. An air terminal employee certified in writing on a passenger search declaration that "An inspection of the following passengers and their luggage has been made and that no unauthorized explosive device or weapon was found."

The passenger was unaware that lighter fluid was prohibited aboard the aircraft or that it posed a hazard. He had supposedly gone through security and baggage screening where his carry-on luggage would have been checked. The can was not hidden but in plain sight in the plastic bag and could have been easily seen had it been inspected — as was certified by the terminal.

Had the can ruptured and begun leaking, an extremely dangerous fire hazard would have occurred.

Grampaw Pettibone says:

Dang blast it! I'm gonna keep poundin' my gnarled fist on the tarmac til I see a turnaround on these hazardous cargo slipups. 'Cept "slipup" is too soft a sayin' for somethin' that could cost lives, not to mention a very big airplane.

There's a lot of emphasis on stoppin' terrorism, specially aboard transports. Can't argue with that. Truth is, a small can of fluid, with just the right source of ignition, can cause a disaster, too. Maybe that fluid ain't, technically, an "explosive" device, but those folks at the terminal oughta get with it and recognize a hazard when one stares 'em right in the face.