

## Cobra Calamity

A section of AH-1W *Super Cobras* launched at 1900 on a night training mission from MCAS Alpha. They planned a hot refueling stop at MCAS Bravo before flying a tactics training flight and returning to Alpha. While refueling at Bravo, the aircrews learned that Alpha was forecasting IMC (instrument meteorological conditions) weather. The mission commander decided that the section would fly the tactics flight with night vision goggles then remain over night at Bravo. They had even brought clothing along for that eventuality.

The AH-1Ws returned to Bravo for more hot refueling after the tactics flight. It was now 2245 and Alpha was forecasting visual flight rules weather between 2400 and 0100. Alpha's ground control approach radar was scheduled to close down at 2300, but a Tacan (tactical air navigation) approach was available.

The section decided to return to Alpha and launched from Bravo at 2310. En route, the mission commander's Tacan acted erratically so he gave the lead to the second AH-1W. Nearing Alpha, the flight began a section Tacan approach. Prematurely, the flight switched to tower frequency after commencing the approach, requiring approach control to communicate directly with the tower to ensure the flight was under its (tower) control.

At the 13-mile point, at 100 knots in a 500-fpm descent, the *Super Cobras* entered thick clouds. Lead's copilot noted that number two was having difficulty maintaining parade position on the starboard wing. At 10.5 miles, the copilot looked away from the wingman to read his approach plate. The leader reported the final approach fix at 10 miles, 1,450 feet mean sea level. The flight was cleared to land. The leader became VMC (visual meteorological conditions) at 1,200 feet, four miles from the airfield. Lead's copilot had lost visual contact with the second AH-1W.

"Are you still with me?" radioed Lead.

The wingman said, "We have broken off and are climbing away."

Lead continued the approach and landed. A witness saw the flash of an explosion some distance behind the leader. The wingman had crashed, killing both crew members.



Grampaw Pettibone says:

**Flyin' wing in the goo is tough business just goin' straight and level. No room for error. The number two Super Cobra simply couldn't stay in visual contact with Lead. Maybe when he lost sight of Lead and had to quickly go on the gages while decidin' a course of action, his duties piled up and he got behind the aircraft. Whatever the distraction, these hard-workin' flyers had been in the saddle for nearly five and a half hours. They didn't egress during refueling. They had to be a bit fatigued. Three of the four pilots had not flown an IMC formation penetration and approach at night. Seems some plannin' for poor weather, approach procedures, and qualification checkin' was in order before launchin' out from the last refuelin'.**

**Hindsight sez they shoulda stayed the night at Bravo.**

**There were many other factors in this accident, but the bottom line is a constant: fly the aircraft - 'specially when the goin' gets tough. Plan your options and trust your gages - fly the aircraft first, then adjust your landin' plans if you have to. Nuff sed!**

## Solos' Lament

Several student Naval Aviators were eager to launch (individually) on their last precision acrobatic solo flight. The FDO (flight duty officer) was anxious to see them airborne as well. Weather was three miles visibility in haze, so the FDO suggested that the students have lunch and return in two hours when the weather might be improved.

When they returned, the weather had hardly changed, but the FDO ordered the students to preflight their aircraft and then come back for a safety briefing. Student "Jones" thought it odd that no other squadron was launching solos that day but complied with the FDO's direction.

After the safety brief, the FDO cleared the solos to launch. Jones was advised, "Don't fly upside down, and make sure the rear cockpit is secure."

Jones, with 20 flight hours of experience, took off. Climbing through 4,000 feet, he realized he couldn't go higher and remain VFR (on visual flight rules). So he stayed under that altitude and tried an aileron roll. During the maneuver, the horizon became a blur due to the haze, and although he could still see the ground clearly, he realized he'd best not continue solo acrobatics.

He reached the initial point on his return, checked in via radio, and heard a panicked transmission from approach control, "Solo, climb. Climb immediately!"

Jones added power and yanked back on the stick. He then looked down and saw two aircraft in formation directly below him.

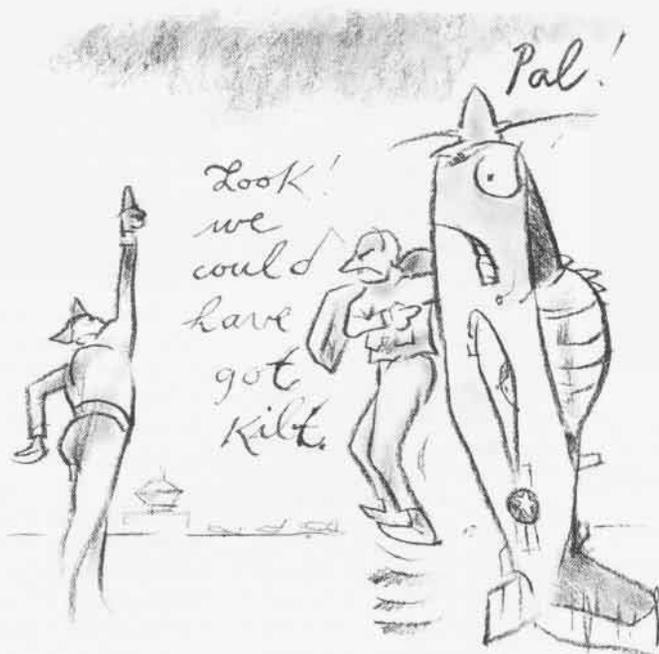
The approach controller explained to the solo student that an IFR (instrument flight rules) flight had decided to penetrate the weather right next to the initial point, a violation of course rules.

The student recovered safely shortly thereafter, as did the other solos. On landing, Jones described his experience at the initial point but got the sense that others, including the FDO, didn't feel the near-miss was "that big a deal."



Grampaw Pettibone says:

**This one yanks my whiskers two ways! First, flight discipline begins on the ground. The FDO was within his rights to authorize the solos to launch,**



but it sounds like he mighta been feelin' a "push" to get students through the program. Considerin' the shaky weather conditions, the FDO shoulda held off launchin' the solos. Last time I looked, we didn't have a rush on to qualify studs. A midair woulda ruined the FDO's whole day, not to mention the parties who mighta smacked into each other.

Second, a midair IS a big deal. In our bird-farm arena, flyin' rules are real important to keepin' one another out of the same airspace at the same time. 'Pears we had a right serious breakdown in how we do that – a closer investigation may have given all of us some ideas as to how to make the area safer next time the weather turns sour. Life is too short and aviation too unforgiving to shrug off an opportunity to learn our business a little better.

Students: keep your head on a swivel and your scan goin' – whatever the weather. Seniors: it's up to you to keep the fledglings flyin' safely.

Attaboy to Lt. Pat Hurley, HSL-34, for his input.

## Bossin' the Boat

A junior Naval Aviator was assigned boat officer duty in charge of a 40-man utility boat during an in-port liberty call. It was 2300 on a dark and boisterous night, and because five Navy ships were

anchored in the harbor, liberty launches proliferated.

Personnel filled the boat for the return trip to the ship. A number of them were intoxicated and the boat officer paid special attention to them. Halfway to his ship, there was a loud thud under the boat. The coxswain had inadvertently run over a bur-lap bag which fouled the prop.

To the boat officer, it seemed as if every passenger, particularly those who had imbibed ashore, wanted to be a savior. A search and rescue swimmer was ready to strip down and dive into the depths, armed only with a bowie knife. At least a dozen engineers were determined to disassemble the engine and fix it on the spot. Several boatswain's mates rum-maged through storage lockers searching

for oars in order to muscle the boat back to the ship. One sailor vomited on the boat officer's shoes, at which point the latter decided to treat the circumstances as a bona fide emergency and handle it as he would an aerial contingency.

With a commanding voice and the able assistance of the duty coxswain, the boat officer ordered all prospective helpers to desist. His first priority was to "aviate" the boat. This was a nonproblem because the vessel was dead in the water. Next was "navigate." He posted a bow linesman to watch for approaching vessels and hail them with a flashlight to indicate the disabled boat's location. Finally, "communicate." He radioed the ship's officer of the day, who dispatched a whale boat to tow the beleaguered group in.

All hands survived.



Grampaw Pettibone says:

**Holy calamity! What an excitin' first command at sea for this young aviator! Fallin' back on Navy trainin' was the best thing this young aviator coulda done, and this boatload was lucky a steady hand with a focus on the problem was there. Situations like this have turned to worms with loss of life. Any boat officer who's had to deal with personnel "in their cups" on a liberty boat knows what a genuine challenge it can be. Had the water been choppy, a lad or two here and there mighta gone for an unintentional swim. And swimmin' in the dark, cold sea is no fun for sailors – regardless of rank or paygrade.**

A tip of the boat officer's bridge cap to Lt. Eric Humphreys, HSL-34.

