

Catapult Calamity

An experienced Naval Aviator with over 4,000 flight hours was making his first catapult shot and arrested landing in an FA-18 *Hornet* during transition training after flying A-7 *Corsair IIs*. There was 26 knots of wind over the deck.

As the catapult fired, the pilot heard a loud bang, as if something had struck the left side of the *Hornet*. He glanced down to check engine instruments but did not focus on them. Once airborne, he felt "an enormous sensation of settling." From his peripheral vision, he sensed that the water was coming up at him so he selected both afterburners.

Still believing he was settling, he reached for the ejection handle and missed. He glanced down, visually acquired the handle and pulled it with his right hand. The ejection sequence was successful and he was retrieved by helicopter. The aircraft climbed then circled back toward the ship before diving and impacting the water several hundred yards abeam the landing signal officer platform.



Grampaw Pettibone says:

Holy Hornets! Heckuva way to lose a flyin' machine! A review of the PLAT (Pilot Landing Aid Television) tapes revealed pitch oscillations once the FA-18 was in the air but also indicated that the aircraft didn't settle abnormally – though the pilot was convinced otherwise. Hmm...

The pilot had been medically down for a few days with a viral upper respiratory infection but got an "Up" chit about three weeks before the mishap. He'd been putting in long hours, however, and had experienced unusual fatigue, although he didn't consider it important enough to consult a flight surgeon. After the accident, blood tests revealed the pilot was suffering from postviral fatigue syndrome, with a secondary mild anemia – a condition that "predisposes one to mistakes, errors in judgment and task saturation, and can impair



Maintenance "dove the ducts," found no FOD (foreign object damage) and the tires checked OK. But the pilot never told maintenance he suspected a compressor stall, which would have downed the aircraft.

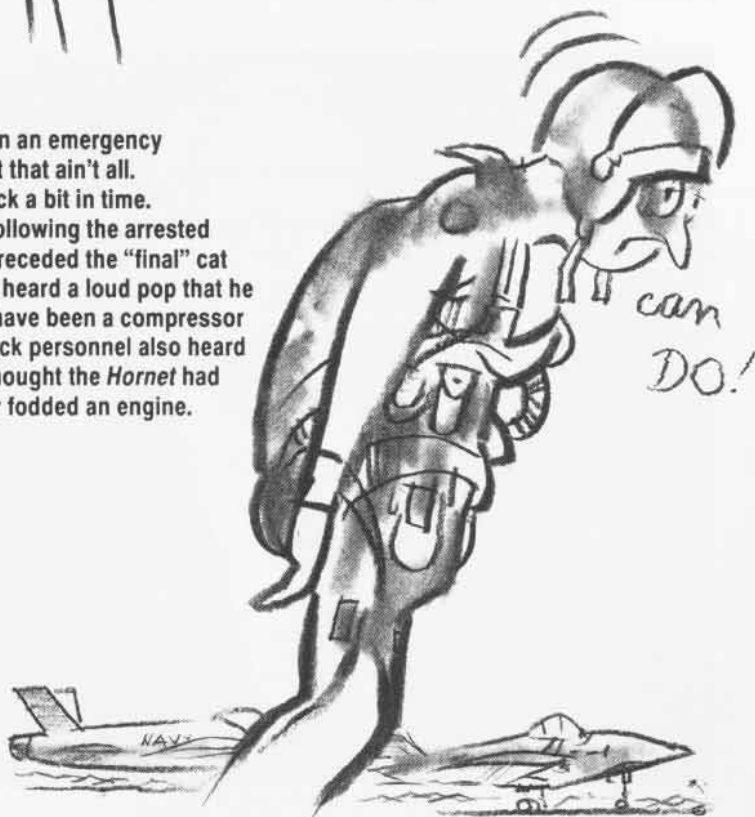
It follows that when the pilot heard the loud bang during the cat stroke, he became distracted. His instrument scan broke down and perhaps due to the lack of confidence in the engines, he was persuaded to eject.

As to the pitch oscillations: per procedure in the *Hornet*, the pilot launched with right hand on right knee and doesn't remember grabbin' the stick, although he wasn't sure. If he did, it coulda been in reaction to the bang and caused those oscillations. Anyway, since it was his first shot in the FA-18, it was a new experience compared to the A-7, which performs differently off the cat.

Traditionally, Naval Aviators are "can-do" people and Gramps salutes

performance in an emergency situation." But that ain't all.

Let's go back a bit in time. Immediately following the arrested landing that preceded the "final" cat shot, the pilot heard a loud pop that he thought may have been a compressor stall. Flight deck personnel also heard the pop and thought the *Hornet* had blown a tire or fodded an engine.





that mindset. But we're also supposed to "exercise sound judgment," which is a fancy way of sayin': **USE COMMON SENSE.** This aviator had no business being on a flight schedule in a high-performance flyin' machine feelin' the way he did.

Feelin' (and bein') fit is part of responsible flyin'. This gent shoulda recognized he wasn't up to snuff and gone back to sick bay, which is where he ended up anyway.

Wall of Weather

The *Seasprite* crew was on a multi-day cross country returning to home base. On the morning of the fourth day, they launched from a USAF base in mid-USA to a second base in the same state. The meteorologist forecast icing at 3,000 feet and recommended the *Seasprite* fly Special VFR (visual flight rules) under the overcast, which was 2,500 feet at launch time. Visibility was excellent.

As the *Seasprite* proceeded westward, the ceiling got lower and visibility decreased. Eighty miles from the departure point, a wall of low clouds loomed, extending for miles in both directions across the route of flight. Now at 1,500 feet, the helo followed an interstate highway. But

weather worsened and the crew had to descend and slow down. Twenty minutes later, the ceiling and visibility had deteriorated even more, so the helo continued onward at 500 feet and 55 knots. The plot (weather) thickens.

Vehicles on the road were going faster than the aircraft. All casual communication within the *Seasprite* ceased as the pilot, copilot and aircrewman studied the threatening weather. Power lines or tall antenna structures suddenly looming out of the dark weather were real possibilities.

Finally, as the nerves of all hands were taut with anxiety, the enlisted crewman declared solemnly but resolutely over the intercom, "You know, this is the kind of situation you read about in 'Grampaw Pettibone!'"

The remark struck home. Tension suddenly dissipated. The pilots realized they had been pressing too hard. It was time to give in to the weather, reverse course and return to base, which they did. They made their way back to the starting point and completed their journey safely, later.



Grampaw Pettibone says:

**From the mouths of aircrewman ...,
God bless 'em all.**

**The lads up front in the *Seasprite*
got so caught up in making it through**

the goo they lost touch with that great and enduring friend of all flyers – common sense – just like the fella in the FA-18, above. It took the wisdom of the aircrewman to yank them back from the edge of a possible predicament. What's wrong with another day on the road compared to tangling with a power line, which accordin' to Gramps' last count has won more battles over aircraft than the other way around!

T'ain't nothin' wrong with fearin' the weather, no matter what aircraft you're in. Plus, in peacetime, no mission justifies goin' up against a force that could be mightier than you.

A tip of Gramps' cloth helmet to LCdr. Greg Gallagher, HSL-34.

