

## Make My Day

In September 1951, a pair of AD-1Q *Skyraiders* launched from NAS Seattle, Wash., on a cross-country to NAS Alameda, Calif. The weather at departure was declared visual flight rules (VFR), but the pilots filed an instrument flight rules (IFR) clearance due to cloud build-ups and some frontal weather along the route. They were instructed to fly 500 feet “on top” of the clouds which reached above 14,000 feet. Pilot #1, Ltjg. Dilbert, had a passenger we’ll call Man-with-No-Name who was hitching a ride to his home base in the San Francisco area. The passenger—a lanky, six-foot-four-inch, 19-year-old Army private serving as a swimming instructor—was sequestered quite snugly in the fuselage crew station.

Dilbert thought that each aircraft was on an individual clearance while pilot #2, Ltjg. Throw-Caution-to-the-Wind, believed the tower cancelled his flight plan and had “attached” him to Dilbert’s. The duo was to proceed as a formation. Both pilots were recent graduates of the Fleet All-Weather Training Unit and were supposedly well versed in instrument and formation flying, day or night.

After takeoff and join-up the flight climbed to altitude and proceeded south on the designated airway. The crewman’s access door popped open in Dilbert’s AD, startling Man-with-No-Name. Air pressure kept it partially and erratically shut, unnerving the private, who reported the condition to the pilot over the intercom. “It was rather chilly in there,” he later recounted. Man-with-No-Name labored fiercely to hold the door shut with little success. The frustrated pilot told him, “You’ve got to get that door fixed.” The private was able to rig the door shut with a loose cable. The aircrew

was on oxygen.

An hour after takeoff Dilbert lost his radios and passed the lead to Throw-Caution-to-the-Wind. Subsequently, the flight entered the clouds and the *Able Dogs* (as *Skyraiders* were called at the time) became separated. Dilbert continued southbound but due to radio-navigation problems could not stay on course. When his oxygen supply ran out, Dilbert descended to 14,000 feet. The private was getting woozy from lack of oxygen. Throw-Caution-to-the-Wind, also having oxygen problems, reversed course, ultimately landing at another airfield.

Then, the intercom failed and all communication between Dilbert and Man with No Name ceased. Dilbert headed west for a time, then turned south. An hour later he activated his identification, friend or foe equipment and turned southwest to ensure he was clear of all terrain, which was cloaked in cloud cover. He believed his dead reckoning navigation would place him over water, west of San Francisco.

After a time he turned east and broadcast in the blind for a steer—his radio was now working, but the intercom was inoperative. He was relayed directions from another aircraft to fly a heading of 045 degrees, which he did. The *Able Dog* had been airborne for nearly four hours.

Man-with-No-Name, figuring the aircraft had to be running out of fuel, was contemplating bailing out, and even practiced releasing his seat belt. Through a break in the clouds he got a glimpse of the Golden Gate Bridge and thought, “Oh, God, phew.” This relief was temporary for the clouds quickly enveloped the *Skyraider*. The private was growing more and more wary by the moment.

When Dilbert later found a break in the overcast, he commenced a

high-speed let-down and released his auxiliary fuel tank. The explosive charge that kicked away the tank sent a shiver through Man-with-No-Name. The *Skyraider* was whistling downward at over 300 knots. The private now concluded that Dilbert “wasn’t gonna just bail out and say, ‘Adios, kid in the back.’” He believed the pilot was going to crash-land at sea.

Dilbert broke into the clear at 800 feet over water, 20 miles from land, and flew above the wave tops which, according to Man-with-No-Name, “Was like being in a high-speed boat.” He thought, “Well, some people have made it through these things before.”

Dilbert saw a lighthouse to the northeast and proceeded toward shore, turning south to parallel the coast at about four miles from land. Out of fuel, the *Skyraider* plowed wheels up, flaps down into the ocean. The aircraft floated for a minute and a half. The pilot got out onto the wing, and after a furious struggle with the jury-rigged access door, Man-with-No-Name safely egressed and joined him. They inflated their survival equipment and headed toward land several miles away. It was late afternoon and overcast with steep swells. The two men tried to stay together but the current forced them northward, and when it grew dark they lost sight of each other.

Some time later, Dilbert reached the shore and from a farmhouse phone alerted the Coast Guard and a search began for the private, who was struggling despite his swimming instructor prowess. “I went through jellyfish schools . . . and they became fluorescent at night. It was like some science-fiction deal.” He began to hallucinate. Catching a glimpse of house lights he thought, “There was some guy up there sitting in front of his fireplace, having a beer. I wanted to be doing the

same thing.”

Man-with-No-Name made his way through a kelp bed using the breaststroke to avoid getting tangled up. He recalled, “There was a lot of phosphorous in the water that night . . . and it was making the water really glow—it was strange.”

Reaching the shoreline he encountered slippery boulders. He managed to cling to one to catch his breath and then worked his way along the rocks until he crawled onto a section of beach. Freezing cold (he was wearing just his khaki shirt and trousers) he began to hallucinate again. The phosphorescence of the ocean led him to think he saw Dilbert in the water. “I’d run out and grab this one rock and I’d run back and sit there. And then I could see the rock moving back and forth, and I’d run back and I’d grab the rock.”

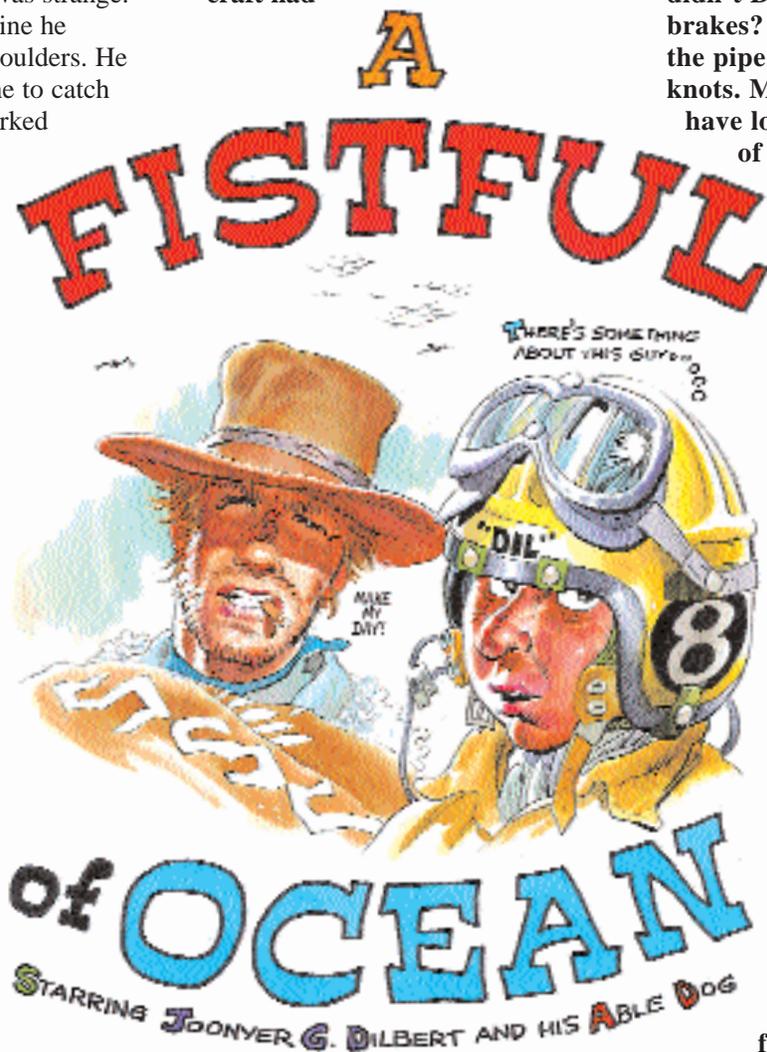
He made his way over more rocks, crossed a lagoon where his presence startled a flock of birds as well as himself, and finally sighted a concrete-block house surrounded by a chain link fence. He climbed over the fence and entered the structure which turned out to be a relay station that transmitted radiograms across the Pacific. The occupant called for help and Man-with-No-Name was finally collected and returned to his home base.



**Grampaw Pettibone says:**

**Great horned toads, slitherin’ snakes and ragin’ reptiles! These**

**pilots were lost before they ever manned up. Preflight planning took a holiday. The passenger got only a cursory briefing and no mention of ditching or survival procedures. Neither flyer checked his oxygen supply because the aircraft had**



**only about half that required by the *Skyraider* manual.**

**Without so much as a “see ya later,” Throw-Caution-to-the-Wind did a 180 when the going got tough. That’s teamwork?**

**When they got lost “on top” while on an IFR clearance, Dilbert failed to throttle back to save gas. Losing his radios made matters worse but he still plumbered along using regular power settings. He’s lucky he and his passenger remained conscious without oxygen.**

**As to who was on whose clearance, investigators never did figure that out, because the controller’s story differed from the pilots.**

**That high-speed let-down must have been exciting. Why didn’t Dilbert extend his speed brakes? Instead, he dove down the pipe reaching well over 300 knots. Man-with-No-Name must have loved the sound and feel of that high pressure air gripping the *Able Dog*.**

**At least pilot #2 got his bird back on the ground. Had Dilbert reduced power when his problems started he mighta made it inland and set down at one of the nearby air bases.**

**Early on in this fiasco this duo should have pressed that button in their brains called “common sense” and returned to their starting point where the weather was VFR.**

**Gramps wouldna wanted to go into harm’s way with either of these fellas.**

**By the way, Man-with-No-Name actually made quite a name for himself—as movie tough guy Clint Eastwood.**

**Gramps was told that it was some time after this episode that Mr. Eastwood learned the area he swam through to safety was a breeding ground for sharks. Maybe the sharks retreated when they realized who was in their midst.**

*Editor’s note: Most of the quotes which appear in this article are from *Clint Eastwood—A Biography* by Richard Schickel.*