

Illustrations by *Ted Wilbur*

Harrier Hang-up

Two AV-8B *Harrier IIs* were set for shipboard short takeoffs on a practice close air support mission. The jets were positioned on the flight deck in line at the 400- and 450-foot marks, respectively. Following a delay for a helicopter launch, the *Harrier* flight was given a “green,” or clear deck. Upon signal from the launch officer (LO), both pilots began their final pre-takeoff checklists. The leader completed his checks first and launched when cleared. The wingman was still performing checks as the lead aircraft departed the ship.

The LO stopped giving signals to brace himself against the lead aircraft’s jet blast. After the blast effects dissipated, the LO returned attention to the second AV-8B. The LO gave the pilot a thumbs-up, indicating the *Harrier* was set for takeoff. Cleared to launch, the pilot began the brief takeoff deck run. Acceleration was slow down the deck and the aircraft drifted left, then steered right toward the bow. The pilot initiated abort procedures but didn’t secure the engine.

The landing signal officer (LSO) saw that the *Harrier* was going to depart the flight deck and transmitted, “Eject! Eject!” The pilot punched out just as the nose wheel and port outrigger departed the deck. The aircraft went over the starboard bow and fell into the sea. The pilot’s parachute opened and he drifted over the forward bow. After one swing, he struck the blades of a parked helicopter feet first. The parachute became entangled in the aft rotor head of the helo and broke the pilot’s



fall, leaving him suspended in his harness over the catwalk. He was safely retrieved but suffered fractures to his cervical vertebrae and an injured leg.

Grampaw Pettibone says:



Great balls of fire and flame! When the *Harrier* pilot began the takeoff roll, the nozzles of his AV-8B were at 50 degrees vice the required 10 degrees! The lead aircraft’s takeoff presumably distracted the second pilot and led to his failing to complete the pre-takeoff checks correctly. It didn’t help that the LSO, the LO and Primary Flight Control personnel failed to verify the aircraft was in the proper configuration before launch. The LO had given the pilot a thumbs-up believing the aircraft was properly configured for launch.

Once the launch sequence started, the pilot didn’t respond to the multiple “Nozzles aft” calls issued by the LSO. Plus, the pilot failed to secure the engine once he elected to abort.

The interval between the launch of the lead aircraft and the wingman was just too brief. Seems like most people were engrossed by the lead aircraft’s takeoff at the expense of number two. Gramps can only ask, “What’s the hurry?”

Gramps is real happy, however, that those rotor blades weren’t turnin’ when the *Harrier* pilot came back down from his abbreviated flight via parachute.

Pouncing Prowler

An EA-6B *Prowler* was on approach to the carrier, and at the three-quarter mile point the ECMO-1 (Electronic Countermeasures Officer 1, in the right front

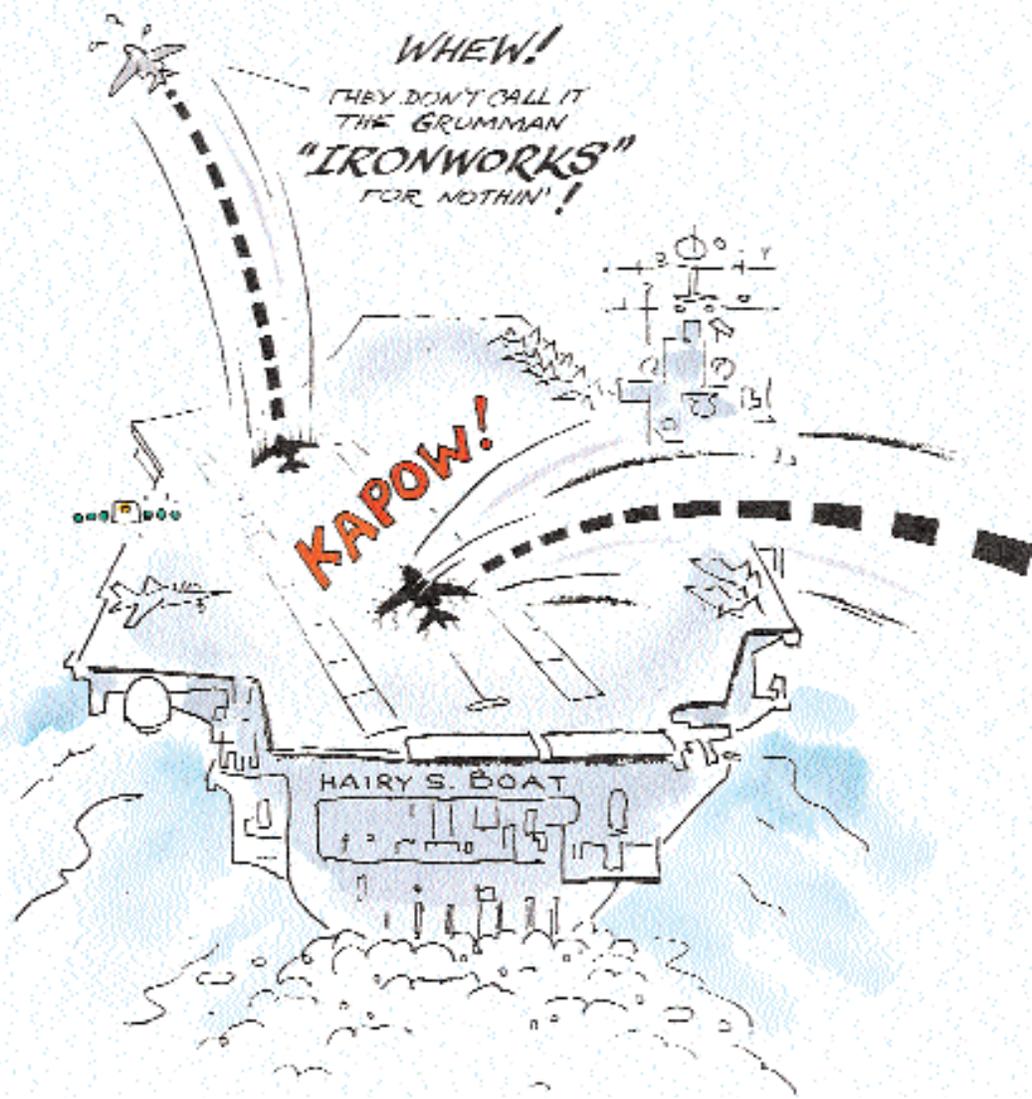


seat) called the ball, indicating he had it in sight. Shortly after this report, the *Prowler* settled, prompting the landing signal officer (LSO) to caution, “Don’t go any lower.” The EA-6B pilot added power to recenter the ball.

The aircraft settled again and in the middle of the final approach the LSO radioed, “Power back on,” then “Power!” The pilot responded with excess power which drove the EA-6B up through the glideslope to a high position at the ramp. The pilot did not make a “Clara” call to the LSO, which would affirm he had lost sight of the ball. The pilot reduced power and lowered the nose, trying to get the *Prowler* back on glideslope, and these control inputs significantly increased the aircraft’s rate of descent.

There were four LSOs on the platform—the controlling LSO, backup LSO, LSO team leader and the CAG (air wing) LSO. The first three did not detect that the EA-6B was too high in close and coming down too fast to make a safe landing. The CAG LSO, standing eight feet behind the controlling LSO, noticed the situation but was not using the third UHF radio required by LSO Naval Air Training and Operating Procedures Standardization. As a result, he could not adequately relay directions to the other LSOs or the pilot. As the *Prowler* crossed the ramp, the CAG LSO moved toward the controlling LSO, yelling “Power.” But due to the distance between them and the noise of the EA-6B’s engines, the CAG LSO was not heard.

The aircraft struck the flight deck in a nearly three-point attitude, blew the starboard mount, bounced back into the air, settled onto the deck and then continued off the angle. The *Prowler* was diverted and made a safe arrested landing ashore. Post-flight inspection revealed significant damage resulting from the hard carrier



landing.

Grampaw Pettibone says:

Great Horned Toads! All that team, but no teamwork.



Coordination amongst the players took a holiday on this approach-and-bolter adventure.

The pilot overcontrolled the bird on the approach, didn’t call “Clara” when he lost sight of the ball and landed hard enough to blow a tire and incur some aircraft damage. Three of the four LSOs apparently felt the *Prowler* would touch down safely, even though a bolter was a possibility. The CAG LSO saw that the bird had an excessive rate of descent but was unable to convey this information in

time for corrective action.

LSOs are not responsible for an aircraft going “high in close,” nor is it their fault if a pilot’s inappropriate corrections create an excessive rate of descent. But LSOs, whose workload and high-pressure responsibilities are second to none in Naval Aviation, must do whatever they can to assist the pilot in maneuvering to a position that will enable a safe landing. And in the world of aircraft carriers, recovering the warriors when they return to their mobile home base is, arguably, the single most critical task of the flattops. Every ounce of energy and all cognizant lines of attention must be focused on the aircraft seeking the glideslope and laboring for a safe touchdown and trap.