



## NANews the Sage Interviews of Safety

In an unprecedented literary exercise, *Naval Aviation News'* Journalist Second Class Timothy J. Christmann recently sequestered Grampaw Pettibone for a one-on-one, Diamond Anniversary Year interview.

NANews: Gramps, you have been giving advice and admonishment to Naval Aviators for 43 years. In your opinion, how has it affected the safety consciousness of the aviation community?

Gramps: Most people in the business of flyin' Navy aircraft — and that includes the Leathernecks as well as Coast Guard folk — know who I am. And they know I don't want them to get hurt or hurt somebody else. They also know I fume and fuss over bonehead mistakes that cause injury, damage or, worse, loss of life and flying machines. I like to believe that I've helped a little, that some accidents didn't happen because of something I wrote.

In January, Attack Squadron (VA) 27 officially became the recipient of the first Grampaw Pettibone Trophy. The award is presented to the individual or organization that contributes the most toward aviation safety awareness through communications (published articles, posters, television and radio broadcasts, etc.). Do you think the award will contribute to an improved Naval Aviation safety record in the future?

It will make me feel a lot younger if the Pettibone award does improve the safety record and I think it will. Those fellows from VA-27 are gonna be a tough act to follow, by the way. They got their whole outfit involved in thinkin' safety. When that takes place, good things happen to a squadron. It also indicates



some-thing else I've always believed. The best managed squadrons are the safest.

Looking back over your career, do you think your critiques concerning Naval Aviation mishaps have been fair?

Not always, son. I'm human. But my heart's in the right place, 'cause whatever I write, I write for one reason only — to make Naval Aviation as safe as can be without sacrificing readiness.

What makes you so popular with the Naval Aviation community?

Bob Osborn, mostly. He's been drawin' me since we joined up in the old Munitions Building on Constitution Avenue in Washington, D.C., in 1943, right in the middle of Double U Double U Two. That fellow makes more magic with a few pen strokes and a piece of paper than Houdini

with a chest full of handcuffs. Bob told me once, "I can draw a robin yankin' a worm out of the ground and make you feel it." And he can. He does it with airplanes like nobody else. Also, he judges my moods and puts 'em on the printed page with his special style, just as smooth as apple butter goin' on home-baked bread fresh from the oven. Best of all, he makes you laugh.

Both of us aim for the heart and the mind by way of a sharp jab in the ribs. Although I gotta tell ya, there are times I wanna swat somebody with the flat side of an iron skillet.

In answer to your question, I believe Gramps succeeds because Bob and I try to tell the truth with humor laced with just enough arsenic to agitate the brain cells. We try to get people to turn on their own "think" juices.

What has been the worst accident report you've had to respond to?

There ain't just one. Anytime we lose somebody — a pilot, an NFO, an aircrew member, a plane captain — I bleed the same amount of blood. That particular accident becomes the worst, for the time being, anyway.

How has Naval Aviation changed over the years? Are you happy with the overall safety record? Why or why not?

That's three questions, son. I'll take 'em in order.

Naval Aviation has changed for the better. No doubt about that. Seems like the planes nowadays dang near fly themselves, what with technology that's fancier than the stars, the moon and Halley's comet all put together. But human beings still make the difference, and today's aviators are better trained

and better educated than ever before. Ted Ellyson, John Rodgers and John Towers, the first three Naval Aviators, would agree, I'm sure.

In the 1950s, we borrowed an idea from the Brits — the angled deck — and it saved us I don't know how many lives and aircraft. In the early sixties, NATOPS was born and the accident rate dropped even more. About the same time, replacement air groups — now called fleet readiness squadrons — became a kind of graduate school for flyers and the statistics continued to improve. We're safer than ever. Trouble is, the flying machines nowadays cost so much I get aches in my head and my stomach.

Am I happy over the safety record? It's my business to be unhappy. I see too many reports of near-mishaps — like hazardous cargo abuse and pressin' on with fuel warning lights lit — to change my mind much. I like the progress we've made with the mishap rate, of course. But I want to see it lower. I know we can do it. The point is we've gotta keep the pressure on. We can't afford not to do better, for economic reasons, pure and simple.

In 1916, a bunch of college boys paid for their own flying lessons, formed the First Yale Unit and later earned Naval Aviator wings. Economy rate pilots. But they were good and true. It costs a million or so George Washingtons to train a flyer these days. And a strike-fighter goes for \$20 million!

What advice do you have for junior officers, who contribute to most of the accidents in Naval Aviation?

Practice makes perfect. Know your NATOPS like Billy Graham knows the Bible. Try to do better on every hop, in everything from preflightin' the bird to holdin' airspeed and altitude right on the button. Be a good wingman. Good wingmen make good flight leaders. Know your machine. Read Chuck Yeager's autobiography and note his great respect for flight manuals and knowing emergency procedures. Remember one of my old nuggets of wisdom: Don't worry about what's gonna happen to you. Worry about what you're gonna do when it happens.

John Glenn — fighter pilot, astronaut, senator — told me once that some of his happiest days were as a junior officer in a squadron. He said, "What a great feeling it was to see that row of aircraft on the flight line each morning, then go out and fly once or twice a day."

For a lot of folks in this business, those junior officer years were the best. So, to the younger troops, I say: Work hard but enjoy yourselves. You couldn't have picked a better way to spend your twenties. But be careful. Just by lack of experience, you're a bit more vulnerable than the vets.

What makes you such an authority on safety?

Experience. And experience always will be the best teacher. 'Course I have some friends who are better at book learnin' than me and I'm smart enough to call on 'em when needed to get the straight dope on certain accidents.

I never pretended to be the smartest guy on the block but I don't think anybody cares more about Naval Aviation and its people than me. That's why I get so blasted mad when things go wrong and they shouldn't have.

I suppose I'm like a mother and father who love their children but lose their cool and lean on 'em hard to mend their ways. I just want our flyers and the ground troops to be the best. If there's fightin' to be done — and I pray that's not in anybody's crystal ball — then we better be the best. That's what it's all about.

What are your thoughts on the 75th Anniversary of Naval Aviation, and what do you foresee in the next 25 years?

That's another two for one, son, but I'll answer.

An acquaintance of mine is a wonderful man — a living legend really — named Paul Garber. He's the gent who laid the groundwork for and is the real spirit behind what we now call the National Air and Space Museum. Paul was a friend of Lindbergh before Lindbergh flew the Atlantic. As a boy in the early 1900s, he went out to Fort Myer, Va., just across the Potomac, and watched the Wright brothers fly. Paul spoke at the Tailhook Convention in 1985 and, to this day, is goin' strong. So here's a man who has seen biplanes — those ancient wood and wire flying machines that could hardly stand up to a sharp breeze — as well as 10-ton supersonic jets take a wire on a nuclear-powered flattop.

This is my way of sayin' we've come far, quickly. Some are still around who were there at the beginning. No tellin' what we'll do in the next 75 years. And Naval Aviation helped lead the way. We oughta be proud of that. All these special

events goin' on are a good idea in my book.

Years ago, long after her husband was killed in a plane crash, I had a nice visit with Mrs. Ted Ellyson, wife of Naval Aviator No. 1. She knew many of those fellas who were the pioneers of Naval Aviation. I asked her what her husband and the others were like.

She said, "I recall one day when Ted was testing a catapult at the Washington Navy Yard. The catapult was aimed from shore toward the Anacostia River. Ted was at the controls. Something went wrong and Ted and the machine smashed into the water. He was only bruised a little. The airplane was hauled up and dried out. It wasn't badly damaged. That same day Ted and the airplane gave it another try. The catapult worked! My husband — he was nicknamed "Spuds" — and the others had a lot of fun. But they also worked hard. They knew they were into something very important."

It sure was. It still is. For dang sure, it will stay so. Keeping safe won't be any easier in the years to come, but I like the fire I see in the eyes of the nuggets in the cockpits today. It makes me wish I could go back to Pensacola, get my character formed by those Marine Corps drill instructors, climb into a T-34C, and start all over again.

Guess that's it, son. Wait. One more thing. Accordin' to my calculator, Naval Aviation's gonna be 100 years old in the year 2011. What a centennial that oughta be. Mark it in your book, son. I plan to be around for that one. Count on it. ■

