



GRAMPAW PETTIBONE

Low-Level Lunacy

Shortly after lunch, two West Coast F-14 *Tomcat* crews briefed for their afternoon low-level navigation/air intercept control mission. A minimum altitude of 500 feet AGL was emphasized since both crews had limited low-level experience. At the completion of their navigation route, they conducted low-level intercepts in the northern half of the restricted area. The bogey was briefed to maintain heading throughout all runs even if the crew saw the "opposing" fighter. The fighter was to acquire visual and radar contact, then maneuver to the bogey's stern quarter to observe low altitude radar capabilities and aircraft turn performance.

The flight launched and proceeded as a section to the first low-level checkpoint. From there they estab-

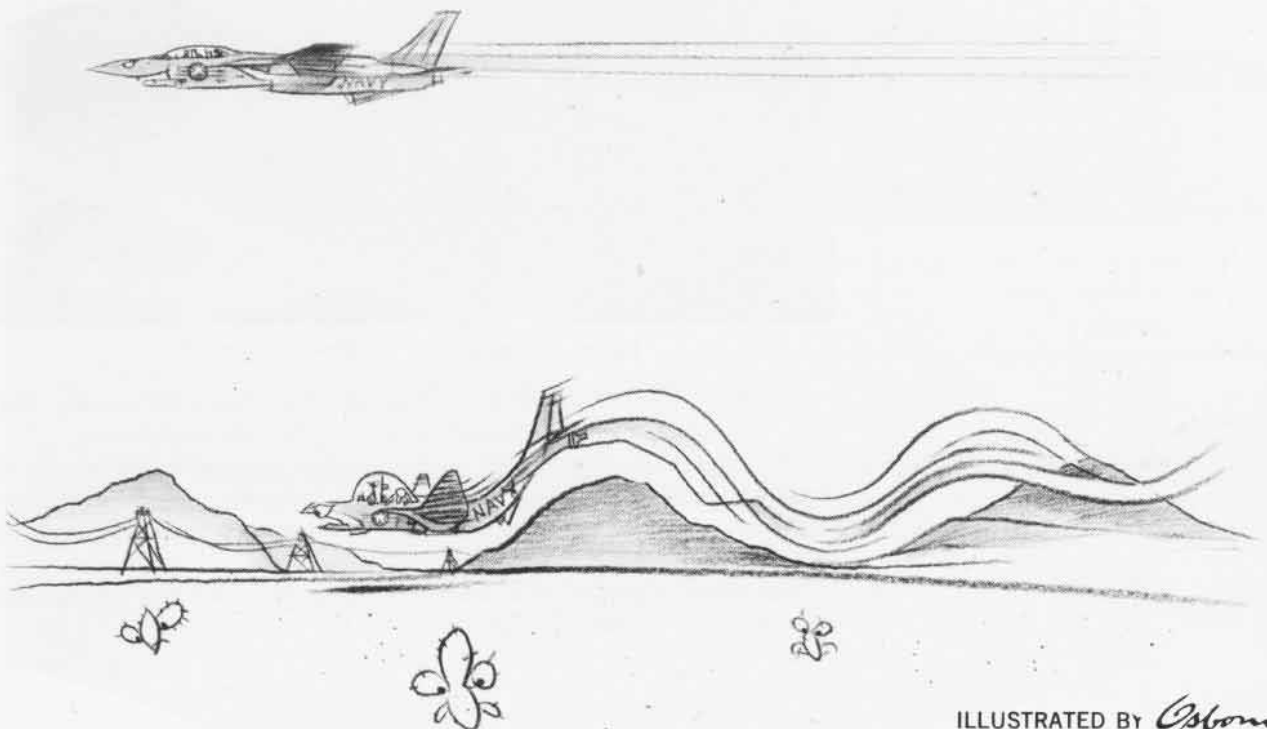


lished interval and proceeded independently around the route in order to obtain maximum training for both

crews. Both aircraft terminated uneventfully in the restricted area and took position as briefed for intercept missions.

Four low altitude (500-foot) intercepts were completed, with the aircraft alternating bogey and fighter roles. At the start of the fifth run the #2 aircraft, acting as bogey, informed his RIO that he would descend a little lower on the run. Terrain height in the area (desert) varied between sea level and 500 feet MSL. The pilot reset his radar altimeter warning from 350 feet to 50 feet above ground level, but did not inform his RIO that he was doing so.

He proceeded inbound from the west at 350 knots and 150 feet altitude, directing his scan forward for terrain clearance and to starboard for visual acquisition of the fighter. Less than a minute into the run, the bogey



pilot sighted the fighter at his two o'clock position, proceeding east-bound at approximately 1,000 feet altitude. About five seconds later, the bogey pilot and RIO felt a severe thump.

The pilot began an immediate climb, leveled at 8,000 feet and decelerated to 250 knots. During the climb, his RIO saw a large hole in the starboard slat. Additionally, he noted that the outer portion of the starboard horizontal stabilizer was bent up at a 90-degree angle. The other *Tomcat* was informed of the problem, rendezvoused and observed the damage.

The beleaguered F-14 was tested in the landing configuration at speeds as low as 115 knots. The flight then proceeded to the closest suitable field, where an uneventful 165-knot straight-in, no-flaps landing was made on the 9,500-foot runway.

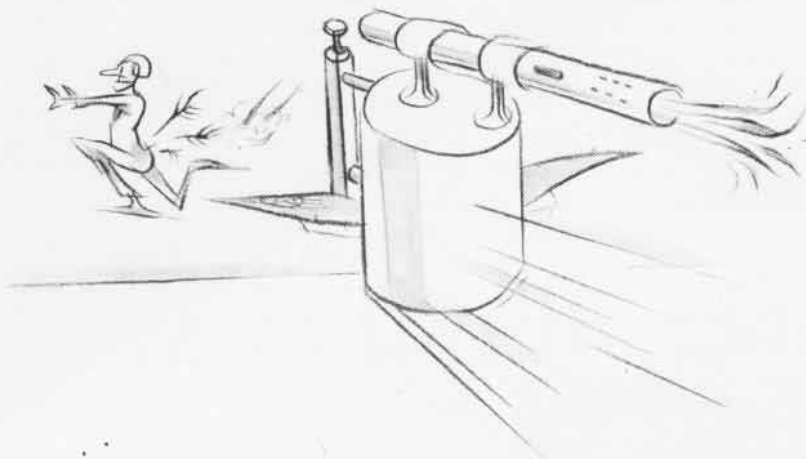


Grampaw Pettibone says:

Holy low-level lunacy! This accident was the result of extremely bad judgment, airmanship and violation of Nap-tops. The loud thump was caused when the aircraft's right wing struck an oblique metal brace on top of a 45-foot-power-line pole. Damage involved the starboard LAU/7 launcher, leading edge wing slat and the horizontal stabilizer. Pure dumb luck prevented this crew from becoming permanently ingrained in the sands of this low-level route. Professionalism on the part of the pilot and RIO (senior member of the crew) was needed on this escapade. Nuff said!

Flame Out to Flame Up

While in the 10,000-foot holding circle, awaiting entry into the FCLP pattern, the pilot of an RF-8G *Crusader* experienced a sudden loss of engine power. All engine gauges were normal except the exhaust gas temperature which progressively dropped to 330 degrees. Attempts to restore power were unsuccessful so the pilot began a flameout, spiral approach to the NALF.



Grampaw Pettibone says:

Great balls of fire! This is one way to warm up a chilly November afternoon. The cause of this young man's misfortune was a misplaced lock washer lodged between the fuel control body and the elbow to the flow meter. The washer prevented the elbow from seating properly and eventually caused the rubber seal to work free, allowing a sizeable fuel leak to develop. Upon landing, the hot sparks from the grinding wheel assembly ignited the fuel pouring from the port aft fuselage section.

The pilot's alert action and skill in getting his "toasted tailpipe" on deck were instrumental in minimizing damage to his ill-fated bird. However, his decision to attempt an arrested landing with a flaming fuel leak leaves old Gramps "pretty cold." It could have "cooked his goose" had he "trapped" and forced the flaming fuel forward, engulfing the cockpit. Fortunately, the hook point failed, thus removing that problem. So, Gramps yields benefit of doubt to Lady Luck. Reason for the tire blowing upon landing is unknown.

All factors considered, this young gent came out of this "hot seat" with only scorched tail feathers rather than singed whiskers!

Power loss continued throughout the approach and, at touchdown, the engine stopped. The port main tire blew and wheel rotation stopped, grinding away approximately four inches of wheel diameter. The wingman, circling overhead, informed the pilot that he had a fire in the aft section of the aircraft. The pilot in trouble then secured the engine fuel master switch and dropped his hook for an arrested landing.

The hook-shank retaining point separated from the aircraft as the *Crusader* continued down the runway. The pilot commenced aerodynamic braking and noted the aircraft veering to the left due to drag from the blown tire and locked wheel. The aircraft slowed and came to a stop 5,200 feet down the runway, just after departing the left edge of the surface. The pilot opened the canopy, unstrapped and jumped out of the flaming aircraft. Crash crews arrived within two minutes and promptly extinguished the fire which was located primarily along the port fuselage from the wing flap to the tail.