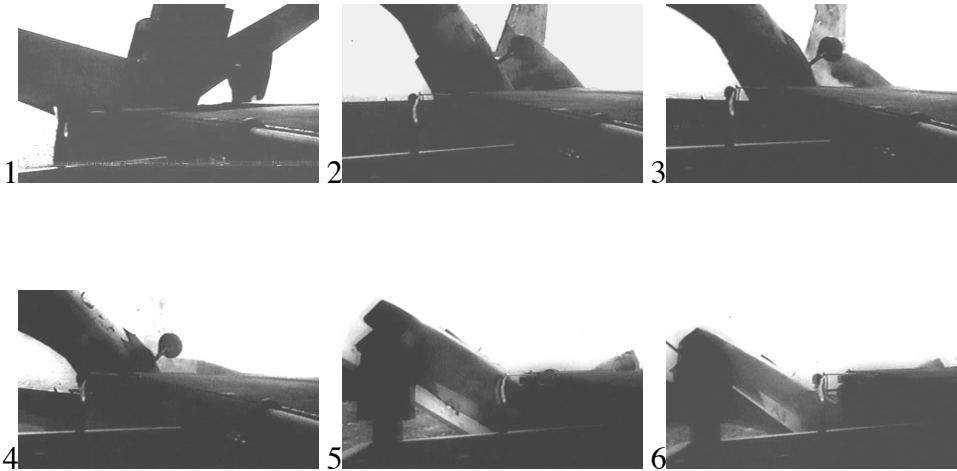


Going over the bow!



THE STORY OF A-3B 142633

A Wounded Whale That Took A Dive

It was a pleasant, sunshiny Sunday morning on the deck of the USS Coral Sea, the 2nd of October 1966. The ship had just completed a lengthy and grueling Yankee Station line period and was now heading towards Subic Bay for a deserved rest for the ships $\frac{1}{2}$ crew and airwing 15. I was a B/N in VAH-2 Det "A" which had four A-3Bs, configured with tanker packages, onboard. My pilot was Charlie Cellar and our Crewman/Navigator (C/N) was Larry Sharpe. Our crew had been selected to fly off early to Cubi Point and we were looking forward to the Cubi Dogs and Cubi Specials and some relaxation time in the Cubi pool. We briefed our flight in the ready room and the weather was forecast to be good along our route and at Cubi upon our arrival. The only thing out of the ordinary for this flight was that we were taking a passenger along who would be sitting on the floor in the rear of the flight deck in what we called the "jump seat." He was a first class electrician, selected to fly in early to Cubi with us because of his outstanding performance during this line period. Larry briefed him on all the safety procedures. He was very excited to be going because it would be his first catapult (CAT) shot and also his first flight in an A-3B. We were also told that we would be carrying some mail bags and packages to Cubi.

At launch time we went out to the flight deck and preflighted our assigned A-3B, 142633 with side number 691, and manned up. We went through all the check lists and everything was proceeding normally. An E-2 was launched ahead of us, also going to Cubi. At our turn, we were directed onto the number two bow CAT. Everything was going smoothly and the CAT officer had now signaled for full power. Charlie checked all the gauges and saluted the CAT officer who saluted back, leaned forward in a crouch and touched the flight deck. Then it happened! Rather than the sharp, powerful jolt of a normal CAT shot, I heard a loud sharp bang and felt a very mild jolt. The nose bounced high and came back down as we started toward the bow of the

flight deck at a slow speed. I remember some debris flying by on the starboard side and people ducking for cover. Charlie was as busy as a one-armed paperhanger. He had the brakes pushed to the floorboard while shutting down both engines and pulling the handle on the emergency air bottle for emergency braking. I thought Charlie was going to get the wounded whale stopped before we went over the bow but I could see we were angling off to the port side. We later learned that the eye of the bridle on the starboard side had been mis-positioned over the tip of the aircraft's CAT hook. When the CAT fired, the tip broke off which let the bridle release and swing violently across from the starboard to port side of the aircraft. The CAT shuttle, which is positioned behind the nose wheel on the A-3, struck and blew the nose tire during its forward movement. This is what had caused the nose to bounce up and had also turned the nose wheel to the left. The starboard main mount was on the greasy CAT track, which didn't help our braking efforts. When the nose gear went over the bow, I finally realized that we weren't going to stop and were going to get very wet.

After the nose of the aircraft had dropped down over the bow, the starboard engine nacelle hung up on the round down for a few seconds before giving way, which allowed us to fall nose down in an inverted attitude. When we hit the water, I remember it as a violent impact with the cockpit almost immediately engulfed with water. It was dark and I couldn't see anything as I unlatched my lap belt and pushed off from my seat. But I felt a tug which held me back. I had forgotten to unhook my oxygen hose from the seat so I reached back, unhooked it, and pushed off again, reaching for the upper hatch. For those reading this who are not A-3 types, the A-3 upper hatch was always positioned open on all CAT shots and arrested landings for emergencies such as this. But we didn't need the upper hatch this time as the whole canopy was gone.

Afterwards when we discussed the accident, we surmised that the pressure created at impact, and being inverted, had blown the canopy out.

After I had exited the aircraft, I inflated my Mae West and ascended to the surface. I estimate we were about 15 ft. underwater at that time. Charlie said that he was right behind me on the way up to the surface. When I reached the surface, I removed my oxygen mask but was having trouble breathing. When Charlie reached the surface, he said that he looked around for the rest of the crew but at first saw only one other head. Then Larry's head finally popped up.

I noticed that I was about 15 ft. from the aircraft and that the tail was sticking out of the water at a 45-degree angle in an inverted position from about the speedbrake location. Charlie also noticed that the tailhook was down. Pictures of the accident taken as we were going over the bow showed the tailhook as being up so we're not sure what caused that to happen. I could hear a lot of gurgling sounds as the A-3 was sinking and could also smell JP-5 fuel. I tried to swim away from the aircraft but didn't make much progress as my right side was really hurting and I was still having difficulty breathing. Charlie swam over to me to check on my condition and noticed that my Mae West was not fully inflated. He pulled both toggles again and it fully inflated. I guess I hadn't pulled them hard enough, as one cylinder had not been activated. At about this same time a crewman in the rescue helo, who also noticed that I was having some difficulty, jumped

into the water and helped me into the rescue sling. From there I was hoisted up and into the helo. I later learned from the doctors that I had suffered broken ribs and a collapsed right lung which had caused my pain and difficulty in breathing.

I do not recall seeing Larry or our passenger in the water nor, do I remember the Coral Sea bearing down on us. Charlie later told me that Larry and our passenger had made it to the surface and were rescued by helo. He also remembers that the Coral Sea was moving away from us as the Captain had put in full port rudder and then back to starboard, which caused the ship to move almost sideways away from us. Our passenger had a severely broken arm and was transferred to the Subic Naval Hospital. Charlie had a laceration on his leg and Larry a cut on one finger. They were both flying again soon. I was grounded for about a month while the superb Coral Sea doctors got me repaired. When I was given my up chit to fly again, it was with Charlie and Larry in our replacement aircraft with side number 691 and yes, it was from the number two bow CAT. Whew! But, this time it worked as advertised.

Our crew flew many more missions together without mishap for the remainder of our cruise. One side note that I should mention is the fact that for several months after our accident, the ships LMC would announce: "Those personnel who lost money orders in the A-3 that went into the water report to the post office." They just wouldn't let us forget. Also, this accident is another reminder that carrier aviation is never routine. An unexpected accident is always just waiting to happen - so be prepared.

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