

Close Shave II

By CDR. Jim Newcomb

I have read Grampaw Pettibones account of the Whale breaking a NUMBER 2 wire and it reminded me of mine board Ticonderoga on the 13th of November 1961, VAH-4 DET BRAVO, BuNo 138966. My account is similar but I flew in ground effect and luckily didn't contact the water. It goes like this... I was tasked by my OinC Cdr. Frank Haak to fly the skipper of the F-8 Squadron, Cdr. Bob Baldwin and the Skipper of the F3H Squadron....Cdr. Smith to Cubi Point. I reluctantly left my B/N, LT. Ziggy G. Williams on board and took my Third Crewman, Chuck Connell with me so I could have him do the tough part of refueling and repacking the chute, if required, after dropping off the two CO's.

Things went well on the drop off and the turnaround. Got back over Tico and had plenty of fuel, 5000 pounds plus. Approach was uneventful and as we touched down, did the "power and speed board" NATOPS thing That Ziggy always LOUDLY reminded me about, and that is when I felt the wire let go....it left us slow, nose high and looking down the port bow catwalk. I dropped the left wing, slapped the gear handle up and when the starboard wing cleared the catwalk, leveled the wings, picked a white cap about 200 yards out on which to splash down on. As I approached the water, those beautiful J five sevens p one zeros were turnin' and burnin' and ground effect kicked in and we flew out of it. As we were climbing out I gave a call " Panther tower, this is Hollygreen 10, Did I break a wire or my hook point?" No answer. I called again, as I'm climbing for all I'm worth ...still no answer. I opined to Connell that because they weren't answering we probably broke a wire and the flight deck was a mess, so I kept on climbing. Tower finally came up as we were passing through 20,000 feet and tells us to go to Strike Control. Connell switched us to button 12 and they give me a heading and distance " pigeons" to Naha but no info as to what happened. We landed at Naha and spent a week in that Mecca with little money and in our flight suits as they turned greener and until we got a message from Tico to go to Cubi.

We were not cleared back aboard until the 27th until the mishap evaluation was completed.

The max trap weight was reduced to 48,000 # gross weight from 50,000# and I recall thinking for the rest of the cruise that I sure wish I had that extra two thousand pounds of JP 4 to play with. The report I was given was that the port purchase cable parted at about 180 feet down from the cross deck pendant swage fitting. The interior of the multi-stranded wire has a core of hemp which gives the cable elasticity. The hemp had degenerated from sitting in salt water in plugged up guide tubes. I never saw that report so I am reporting what was given to me and I don't recall by whom. Upon breaking, the frayed end apparently went supersonic in a whipping motion and sprayed the starboard side of the vertical fin and the underside of the starboard horizontal stabilizer and elevator with hundreds of small pieces of West German Solengin steel wire as it fed through the hook. I know that doesn't make sense but I do know that the holes were there. They looked like they were pierced with an old-fashioned beer can opener.

The wire went up forward and amazingly did not hit anybody or anything. It did break the windows in Pri-Fly and came back along the area between the right landing foul line and the Island, hit a Wakasha and then wrapped around the Starboard mirror (yes, we had two mirrors on the Tico at that time, a port and a starboard but to this day but I don't know why). A CPO, whose name I wish I could remember, had taken refuge behind that mirror had his legs badly broken. I pray that he recovered fully.

The postscript to this tale is that we had another broken wire on the Tico by the same aircraft Piloted by Cdr. Frank Haak (Rear Admiral RET) and crew within a month after mine. I can let him tell that one but I can tell you he flew out of it as well.

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Editors Note: A-3 landing weights were steadily reduced until the maximum landing weight was set at 48,000#. EA-3Bs, RA-3Bs, EKA-3Bs all had basic weights around 44,000 so you didn't have much room to play with when it came to bringing a Whale home. ERA-3Bs were so heavy they were not allowed aboard CVs.