



## On Becoming Old Heads

There's more to being a good pilot than just being in the books.

by First Lieutenant C.W. McCausland  
Det 9, 67 ARRS  
Zaragoza AB, Spain

**L**ife in a combat rescue detachment for a brand new copilot was anything but dull. I had jumped from the relative tranquility of flight school, with its same old traffic patterns and single-engine Hueys, to the advanced state of twin-engine Hueys and combat operations. Here was a whole new world of operations limits, aircraft characteristics, emergency procedures, combat tactics, and peacetime search and rescue (SAR)—all the stuff that, once learned, made you a "rescue pilot."

I reported for duty bright and early that Monday morning. (Well, early maybe, but perhaps

not so bright). A cold front had moved through our area leaving a solid overcast at 2,500 feet and a heavy drizzle. Visibility was good—for the moment, that is.

As I walked through the door I was met by the cheery face of my friend, First Lieutenant "But the Book Says" I.M. Stickler, called Hopalong for short, which is another story in itself. Hopalong was a good pilot and had just recently upgraded to aircraft commander. He knew his books, too. Cold! His only drawback was that he sometimes had a tendency to worry more about regulations than wires, trees, and other things that jump up out of the ground

while you're flying. Hopalong hadn't put any gray hairs in my temples yet, but I was determined to stay on top of the aircraft in the air and worry about memorizing regulations later on the ground. Anyway, we were two young lieutenants ready to take on the world.

"Such a deal I have for you," grinned Hopalong. "How would you like to fly this morning? We've got to get this currency flight in today because we're behind in flight time, and the PJs need some jumps to stay current. After we do the jumps, maybe we'll get an instrument approach or two."

Being a young buck copilot, I

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jumped at the opportunity for more flight hours, forgetting my previous misgivings about the weather. "Great," I replied, "What's the weather like?"

"Weather says we've got a 2,500 foot overcast with 3.5 miles vis, freezing level is at nine grand, and the winds are northwesterly at 10 knots," replied Hopalong, matter-of-factly.

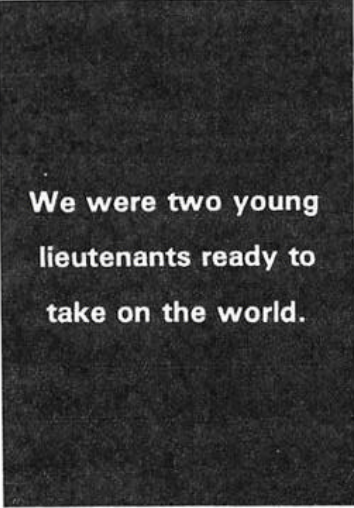
Our local procedures required 3,000 feet and 4.3 miles visibility for VFR, and we also needed 2,400 feet and less than 15 knots winds for the jumps. While those figures didn't seem too bad, our area was notorious for the winds picking up real quick. I also pointed out to Hopalong that the weather looked pretty nasty for an inexperienced copilot and a new AC.

"Naw!" replied Hopalong. "We'll go special VFR in the control zone and go up to take a look at the ceiling with the PJs ready to go in the back. And if we hurry, we'll beat the winds. Besides, do you want to fly or not? After all, we are combat-qualified pilots!" Hopalong said all this grinning enthusiastically. How could I resist? More importantly, I didn't want to be known as a strictly VFR pilot, so I clammed up about the weather. Besides, the 2.5 hour sortie looked good to me.

Off we went to the briefing room. We hurried through everything because we didn't want a late takeoff. Hopalong hated late takeoffs and showed a tendency to rush things when running late. We did a quick preflight. Really quick! It was raining, cold, and the wind was pretty nippy. Then we started the checklists for getting cranked up and ready to go.

Our combination "PJ-safety observer-flight engineer-jump master-navigator-chief scanner

—and senior experienced crew-member" was in the back of the plane. In those days "Mother MAC" did not require flight engineers on all flights. Sergeant Boom-Boom (so called because his name was hard to pronounce) had been around awhile. He had a lot of "saves," a chest full of medals, was the unit power-lifter, and was never afraid to voice his opinion.



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We launched and got clearance to 2,400 feet for the first observation pattern and PJ streamer drop. The first pattern showed everything was still okay, but the ragged edge of that overcast was awfully close to our rotor disk. Surely Hopalong noticed, I thought, but he was busily reciting parameters and checklists and the like. I was the copilot so I watched the altimeter and cleared left.

One thing I had learned about PJs in my short experience with combat rescue was that they were every bit the rough and ready professional airmen their credo says they are. But I had also learned that PJs don't like clouds. I turned around and saw

them huddling in the back with Sergeant Boom-Boom, peeking at us in front, while two guys in the door were saying, "... this pass... we're going."

Thirty seconds prior to the drop, the ragged edge of the clouds reached down and grabbed us. There we were, in the clouds, with PJs in the door, ready to jump. We managed to break out and Hopalong started a left-hand crosswind turn for another pattern, with no descent. And wouldn't you know it, we punched right back into the clouds! I went on instruments (just like they taught us in flight school) while Hopalong was busy reporting what the book said to do in a situation like this and looking for the ground out of the right window.

After watching him maneuver the aircraft through a nose high attitude and into even more right bank, I had had enough. With 40 knots indicated, I pushed the cyclic back over to wings level and asked Hopalong to please get on the instruments. Although I didn't have vertigo yet, I wasn't too sure about my AC. I kept quiet, but my feelings of self-preservation were beginning to override my conduct as a "good" co-pilot.

We went into a descending left hand turn with a pretty good rate of descent, when I remembered the *big* power lines that were out there somewhere. Just then, a mesa jumped up about 1,000 feet out of the ground, right in our area.

Just as I grabbed the controls, we broke out about 300 feet above good old terra firma. I put us in a straight-and-level attitude and gave the controls back to my friend who admitted that he really didn't know where we were. He asked me to fly him back to base and I readily agreed. When we landed I



figured we had cheated the specter once that day and would call it quits. Right? Wrong!

Over the intercom, I heard, "We'll just drop the PJs off and go grab some actual instrument time!" I looked in utter disbelief at my AC. He was *dead* serious! Ready to go! I looked back at Sergeant Boom-Boom. He had lost his confident look, but kept quiet nevertheless. (I had never known him to keep from speaking out before.) Oh, well, my heart rate was back to normal, so why not?

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We came up on the GCA radio frequency and asked for vectors to a PAR. Punching into the clouds, we started a climb to 8,000 feet. Everything was, for the moment, under control. We weren't getting vertigo and we were getting some good training. Sergeant Boom-Boom, meanwhile, had moved up between the seats to watch. Not that he didn't trust us, you know, but I think he had just about decided these two young lieutenants needed some looking after.

Going through 6,000 feet, I noticed a little ice under the windshield wipers and *assumed* Hopalong had seen it also. After all, he was the AC. At 6,500 feet, with Sergeant Boom-Boom's

steel grip crushing my shoulder and his other hand pointing at the wipers, I decided it was time to let Hopalong know what was going on.

"Hey Hoppy," I tried to say as casually as I could. "How about asking GCA for a lower altitude? It's getting a little icy up here." My friend looked up in surprise but readily complied. We got back down to 5,000 feet and the ice changed to rain water.

We shot our first PAR approach with no real problems other than the fact that we didn't break out until the last 100 feet. Before I could speak up and suggest that we talk about things, Hopalong had gone and missed the approach, and put us right back in the clouds. I wondered if he had noticed the ground fog rolling in from the north?

"Okay, brief your approach. It's your turn," said my AC in all honest professional sincerity. He was actually *enjoying* this stuff. On the other hand, I was beginning to develop a PJ attitude towards clouds.

I briefed my approach and assumed control of the Huey. Instantly, I felt better but finally realized the foolishness of all this. I decided that we were going to land at the end of this approach, and then have a little pow-wow. We broke out into a sucker-hole over the field, but there was a fog bank building ever closer to the northern edge of the field. I finished the approach and went to tower frequency for clearance to land and for termination. "Where are you going?" inquired Hopalong. "We still have half an hour of good flying time."

"Let's land and talk about it," I replied. I could hear the cheers from the back without the use of the intercom.

I landed and went to flight

idle with the throttle. "Look," I said to Hopalong. "We've got a sucker hole right over the field, fog on the northern edge of the field with winds picking up and blowing it our way. Let's shut down and call it a day."

Sergeant Boom-Boom finally spoke up, "Right, sir. We were really kind of pushing it out there today. Besides, I'd like to be able to hug my wife again."

Hopalong was thoughtful for a moment and then said, "You're both right. Today has been pretty rough. There isn't any sense pushing it just for the sake of currency."

As we all agreed and finished shutting down the bird and cleaning up the checklist, my friend spoke up, "Besides, if we don't stop to think about it every so often, how are we ever going to become 'old heads'?"



#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

A 1979 graduate of the Air Force Academy, Lieutenant McCausland completed undergraduate helicopter training in 1980. After transitioning to the UH-1N at Kirtland, he was assigned to Det 9, 67 ARRS at Zaragoza. Lieutenant McCausland currently serves as an aircraft commander and the safety officer at Det 9.