



## Dead Stick Landing Fitzgerald, GA

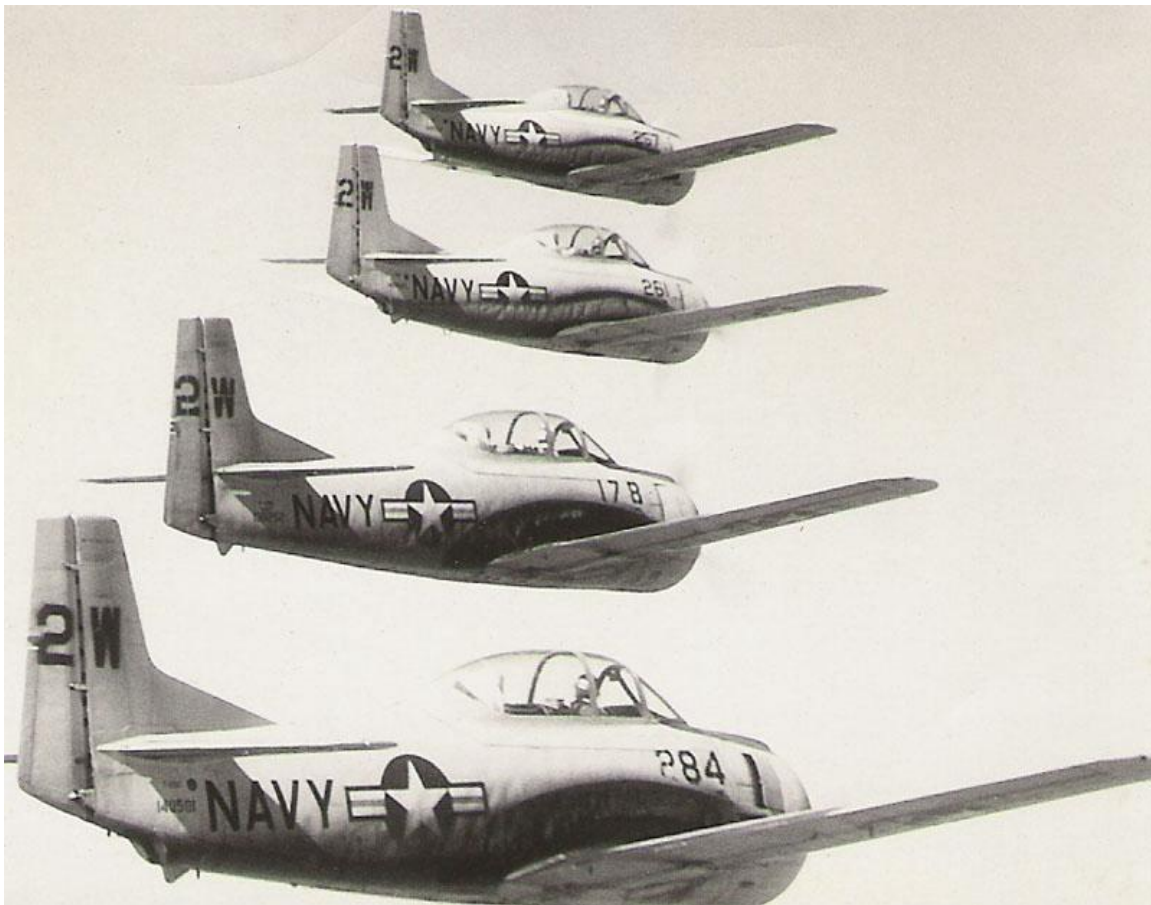
It was 6 AM on Friday morning on 15 September 1961 when I left the house on Cypress Street in Milton, Florida with my DOP kit and clothing bag and headed for NAAS Whiting Field. Two weeks had passed since my wife had given birth to our third child. I had taken leave to help care for my two boys aged four and two while she recuperated and cared for the new baby. Now I owed some instructional time to VT-3. Commander Grosser, the XO of Navy Training Squadron Three at South Whiting had asked me to chase a Day Navigation flight so three stragglers could get to carrier quals with their classmates. The DAYNAVs required three legs of cross-country navigation with an overnight [RON] at a Military Air Station.

The record 95,000 accident free flight hours that had been accumulated in VT-3 loomed above. The pressure was on to take the record to 100,000 and beyond. No one wanted to be the first pilot to have an accident. Ninety Five Thousand hours of accident free formation flying had stretched the luck of the students and pushed the skill of the flight instructors to their limits.



VT-3 was comprised of three units. Unit one was Radio Instrument training. The student was under an instrument hood in the rear seat without visual reference to anything outside the cockpit of the T-28 for twenty flights. Unit two, my assigned Unit was formation flight training for twenty flights. Unit three was formation flight and gunnery training. The three daytime navigation flights concluded the VT-3 training syllabus.

After parking the little Rambler in a reserved slot, I carried my bags topside in the VT-3 hangar. I quickly changed into my zoom bag [red flight suit] and proceeded to the schedules board with an ever increasing load of baggage. Under **DAYNAV** at the top of the board was *Cathcart* with three student names chalked in below. I recognized the name *Roth* listed as number three. Oh-oh! I remembered him as the white haired, old looking ensign who had experienced an engine failure a few weeks before. His instructor, *Dick Harper*, had maneuvered the smoking T-28 for a flawless dead-stick landing into South Field.



Formation flying is inherently extremely dangerous. Flying T-28 aircraft in tight parade formation with 10 feet of wingtip clearance, 10 feet of step-down

between planes and 10 feet of nose to tail clearance left little margin of safety for the novice student pilots. Throw in the possibility of aircraft maintenance and material problems and the accident potential increases by at least double. Twenty foot tall letters shouted **DON'T STALL** from the side of the hangar as we manned our planes. However, I could visualize **100,000** just above the ominous warning.

Following the threesome out to the warm up area was routine. We weren't emulating the Blue Angels but the students were looking good. Takeoff, rendezvous and climb out were routine. Lead leveled the flight off at 3500 feet. Typical procedure for me after level off was to fly up abeam on the right side of the formation, pull up and barrel roll over the top of the students, passing inverted when directly overhead the formation. I checked the wingtip and nose to tail clearances between the flight members. After checking the aircraft positions, I completed the roll and dropped down directly behind the formation, checked the step down clearances and checked the props as matching my rotation. Dash two and three both were showing a propeller setting of 2400 RPM vice the required 2200 for cruise. Looking through my prop at their propeller rotation showed a rapid right swing of their prop blades meaning they would consume excess gas at the higher RPM. I knew if they had not moved the propeller lever to the cruise position that they also had not touched the mixture handle since moving the mixture handle aft to the 'Norm' position would immediately follow prop lever movement to 2200.



"Mofak Two and Three, move your mixture control to normal." Still looking through my prop, I saw the rotating props on dash 2 and dash 3 slow until both stabilized at my RPM. The students realized they had not completed the level off procedures and proceeded to do that in sequence. The VT-3 flight students continuously passed the word to new students that I would fly over the formation inverted and check the position of the mixture lever. If I saw the red knob in the 'Rich' position, I would radio them to put the mixture lever to 'Norm'. I never bothered correcting that widespread myth.

"Lead, put your flight in spread formation." Time to start navigating and that meant every pilot had to keep track of their position at all times. The flight moved out to a wide formation that put the wingmen almost abeam of the leader with 200 feet between aircraft. We were on course for MCAS Beaufort, SC.



Within fifteen minutes Dash three began to drop back. It was common for cross-country wingmen to set the power too low and drift back. They were afraid of getting ahead of the leader. "Mofak Three, you are too far aft. Move up abeam of lead." Dash three slowly closed the gap until nearly abeam. Then he again started falling back slowly.

When Dash Three dropped behind my position 200 feet aft of the formation, I barked at him, "Dash Three get back up into your position abeam of Lead. Then set your power to remain in position."

"Dash Two, what is the name of the town at two o'clock?" It was necessary to question the students to insure that each was navigating from his position in formation.

"Sir, the town at two o'clock is Bainbridge, Georgia." Dash two was doing OK.

Dash three was behind me again. He was dropping down and aft which required even more power to regain his position in the flight. "Dash Three move back up into position abeam of Lead. This time when you get in position,



set the power high enough to stay abeam!" Ten minutes later, three was in position.

"Dash Three, what is the name of the city at nine o'clock?" Several minutes seem to pass with no response. "Dash Three. What is the name of the city at nine o'clock?"

"Mofak....Ah, Sir that would be Albany, Georgia." Oh-oh. While poring over the map he had set the throttle too low. He was rapidly dropping down and aft. I gave him a couple of minutes to catch his problem.

"Dash Three. Put your aircraft up in position and stay there or we will return to Whiting and drop you off with an unsat! Now get your ass in position!" Dash Three had become an unsafe distraction.

"Roger Sir!" Dash Three responded. As I watched his plane during his roger, black smoke poured from the engine stacks. I had seen the phenomena before when flying A-1 Skyraiders. It usually occurred when the pilot shoved the throttle too far forward for his propeller setting. The engine could not take all that Manifold Pressure unless the RPM was set to accommodate the high power setting.

Banking my plane toward Dash Three, I watch the black smoke suddenly stop. The plane was dropping back more rapidly. "This is Three. My engine just quit!"

"Put your mixture control to Full Rich. Push your prop lever full forward. Bring your throttle back to about cruise position." After a pause, "Is the engine running again?" He was losing altitude. "Trim your aircraft up for 130 knots. Try to hold that airspeed." We were below three thousand feet. "Hit your primer. You need to start that hummer. Prime while jockeying the throttle. Is it trying to run?"

"No Sir! It is not trying to start." For a student pilot so screwed up, he was not in a state of panic. My brain was going a mile a minute. Training Command regulations called for a wheels up landing on unprepared, dirt, gravel or non hard surface landing strips. No hard surface airport was within gliding distance. Well, there goes the 100,000 accident free hours, I was thinking.

"Fitzgerald, Georgia is seven miles at 11 o'clock. There is a dirt strip there. We cannot get you to a hard surface field. Pull your prop all the way aft to get

maximum glide. Do exactly what I tell you and we will get this plane down safely." The sick bird seemed to pick up 10 knots with the prop in high pitch.



"Mofak Lead, orbit overhead at 3500 feet. Go to Guard channel and broadcast a MayDay with our position and our problem. We will stay on tactical so I can talk Dash Three down to landing." "Break, Break! Three, the strip appears to be grass. The landing strip runs about north and south. The wind is out of the southeast. We cannot make a high key so we will modify the approach to hit the abeam position and hit roll out on final. Turn left to 350 degrees. Roll wings level. Hold that heading."

We were coming down fast. We were at 1000 feet and not quite abeam. This would be a short final. I flew parade position on the right side of Dash Three in order to keep the grass strip in sight and to control his turn, flaps and landing gear. We came off the abeam at 700 feet. I started him turning immediately. "Dash Three start a twenty degree bank left turn. Keep your attitude and speed." Coming through the 90 degree position we were 400 feet and looking good. The field appeared to have grass a foot deep. A small piper landed in front of us and took off on a touch and go.

"Chase, where are we landing? Will I be dropping the wheels?" We were turning to the final approach.

"Start rolling out now. Extend one half flaps. Roll wings level." We would cross the barbed wire fence about twenty feet above the ground. "Drop your wheels. Put your gear lever to the down position. Trim in some back pressure." The wheels came down and locked. "Now Flare the aircraft. Raise the nose to

hit main mounts first. That's it. Great job. Now get on the brakes!" I flew past his aircraft rocking my wings. There was a small wooden building about 100 feet left of the landing area. A small aircraft was parked near the building. "Three, relax and hang around the airport. Someone will call and tell you how to get back to Whiting. Semper Fi."

My two remaining students were clearly visible overhead Fitzgerald in a port orbit. I dropped in behind them, checked their prop rotations and called on Guard channel, "Mofak flight go tactical."

"Mofak Lead is up."

"Twoooooop!" Dash two was up.

"Roger flight. Change the destination to Hunter Air Force Base, Savannah." We'll get on the deck as soon as possible to assist VT-3 in recovery of the T-28 and the Stud. Then we can teach the Air Force how to arm wrestle and drink flaming hooks."

~~~

Post script: VT-3 went on to achieve about 120,000 accident free flight hours of instruction before finally having an accident. It should be noted that had Roth's T-28 flipped or cart-wheeled on landing at Fitzgerald with the gear down in violation of regulations, I would probably have received a court martial rather than the Letter of Commendation and the Old Pro Award for 1961.

### **Back to Back We Face the Past**



Donald Cathcart LtCol USMC Ret.

