

The Loss of LTJG Tom Williams

This is a tribute story about LTJG Tom Williams, one of the A-6 community's most promising pilots, whose life was cut short in a freak accident in the Mediterranean Sea on 16 February 1970.

Tom and I had come through VA-42, the east coast RAG, together and then teamed up as a crew in VA-176. I could tell from my first flight with him that I had been blessed with a cool character who had exceptional flying skills. He was to prove that so many times in our time together.

Off the coast of Pensacola Tom and I were introduced to our first daytime carrier landings and Tom was making it look like a walk in the park. I greatly appreciated that. We were stoked going into our first night landing. The only thing I had to do for a night cat was to hold my flashlight on my left knee pointed at the back-up VGI in case we lost all electrics off the cat. What was the chance of that? I couldn't believe it. Just as the hydraulic cat smacked us toward the bow everything went black. I had a job to do, and, more importantly, Tom was going to have to fly us off and stay out of the water. Luckily the VGI worked like a champ and Tom coolly climbed us out while I pulled the RAT. We called it a night and returned to base and the BOQ for a well-earned drink.

About six months after learning Rule One in Naval Aviation - that the plane will try to kill you at any time if you don't take it seriously - we were suddenly heading to the Mediterranean rather than Vietnam for our first cruise. For literally a year we had been preparing for Vietnam and planning for our future flights into North Vietnam. I actually had created my radar prediction maps for targets in Hanoi. Now instead of bombing "gooks" we would be tracking Russian ships around the Med and planning for a big nuke strike, when and if, the flag went up.

In February we were scheduled for our first full day of flight ops after spending some time in Barcelona. The weather was terrible and the sea state made us glad we were on a carrier rather than our destroyer plane guard. But Intruder crews don't care about the weather, right? We were out for a day in the sky paid for by Uncle Sam. Tom got everything running, checked fuel, and we were taxied on to the cat. Everything looked good on both sides of the cockpit, checklist complete, Tom gave the salute, and bang, we were moving down the cat. The last thing we ever expected was a port fire engine light half way down the track.



LTJG Tom Williams (R) and John Hickok

Having had an incident on the cat before I thought we were ready to face whatever was happening, but an engine fire gets your attention no matter what your experience level. Luckily, we had two engines and had practiced procedures for engine fires in the simulator at Oceana. I called in the problem while Tom sorted out the engines. Flight Ops reported they could see no indication of a fire in either engine. Nevertheless, we decided to shut down the port engine, where the fire was indicated, and dump fuel and practice ordinance for an immediate return and trap. With the gear up we appeared to be doing fine with just the starboard engine. What we did not know until much later was that our starboard engine was actually only giving us about two thirds of its expected power. The problem was that the cross over bleed air line from the starboard engine to the port engine had disconnected on the cat shot and was discharging super-heated air into the port engine bay, which touched off the engine fire warning sensor. We did not have a fuel fed fire at all.

Approach control took hold of us and vectored us into a long straight-in approach to trap. The flight deck crew did an amazing job clearing the deck for us. We kept dumping fuel down, keeping just enough for a couple of bolters and reserve to get to Gibraltar, the NATO divert field for the day. We completed the single engine landing procedures. Our skipper came up on the radio to ensure we had dropped all our ordinance and drop tanks, so we would be as light as possible. Everything looked great, but then Tom said the starboard engine didn't feel like it was giving us all the thrust it should. It wasn't until he dropped the gear and we picked up the ball that Tom said he was having to put on extra throttle to keep us on glide path. As we got lower and closer to the fantail it was evident that we had a very nasty situation. Tom put on more and more power just to maintain altitude. Finally, in close, Tom had to abort the approach because we were at full power and headed for a crash on the fantail. In the port turn we just missed the ship and could see the LSOs staring at us in disbelief and yelling wave-off. We got wings level and started paralleling the ship in what was a very high angle of attack to try and stay airborne. We were just starting to hold altitude at about twenty feet above the water when Tom said he was going to raise the gear to reduce drag and hopefully fly out of the ground effect. Unfortunately, we didn't think about the way the wheels came up on the A-6. When the gear started its upward trajectory, they rotated so the wheels would be flat when entering the fuselage. While this was happening, there was actually additional drag on the aircraft, and we started sinking again. Immediately Tom made the fateful decision to get out and told me to "eject, eject, eject". Luckily, I was ready to go and had a tight grip on the upper curtain. I pushed my head back, pulled the curtain over my face and then everything went black.

The next thing I knew I was waking up, looking at the surface of the Med about fifteen feet above me. Luckily, I woke up quickly, because I was still attached to my ejection seat and sinking fast. Natural fear and memories of what we were told at Pensacola pushed me to twist myself from the seat and swim to the surface. There I was met with a mess of parachute, and huge waves, and I was breathing rapidly as I pulled my survival vest inflation toggles. Just then something hit me in the back. I first thought about growing up in Miami, Florida and the threat of sharks. Twisting around, lo and behold, it wasn't a shark, but the port horizontal stabilizer of our A-6. The damn plane was just sitting on the surface and floating right next to me. We

literally could have ridden the plane into the water, powered the canopy open, and crawled out. At a future debrief I discussed what had happened with our Skipper, "Black Jack" Davis. It appeared that the high angle of attack of the plane and vector of my ejecting seat, perfectly counteracted the forward velocity of the plane. The old A-6A Martin Baker seats were not very powerful and less capable than today's zero/zero wonders. I almost landed right back in the cockpit.

I quickly realized I was not in a good situation with this huge airplane, probably headed to the bottom, right next to me. I remembered the tales of aircraft being caught up in parachute shrouds and taking aircrew down with them. I found my shroud line cutter, feverishly cut myself loose from the parachute, and soon I was safely separating from the fuselage. This was the first time I had a chance to try to find out where Tom had landed. Looking forward I could see him some 100 feet forward of me, but I'd lose sight of him every time I was in a wave trough, plus I had lost my glasses during the ejection so I couldn't see exactly what was going on with him. It was then that I heard the sound of the rescue helo overhead and saw the "jumpers" giving me signal questions to determine whether I was ok or not. I gave them a thumbs up and pointed at Tom, since I didn't see much activity. The helo moved forward and one rescuer jumped from a pretty high altitude to reach Tom. Every once in a while, I could see him trying to attach a cable to Tom, but I wasn't sure he was successful. All of a sudden, the helo gained altitude, pulled the rescuer up into the cargo bay and headed for me. The next thing I knew a rescue seat was lowered down and a rescue crewman helped me in to it for a standard extraction. In the helo I passed out and came awake in the medical bay aboard the Roosevelt.

It wasn't until I woke up in the sickbay that I asked the doctor how Tom was doing. He was surprised, and asked me to wait for someone from the squadron. I had a sickening feeling in my stomach. When the Skipper, CDR Davis, arrived, he told me that they couldn't save Tom, and that, in fact, his parachute had been snagged by the plane and he was taken down despite the effort of the rescue crew. I asked some more questions and the Skipper said it appeared that Tom was unconscious in the water and couldn't help himself in the water. It also appeared the "jumper" was having trouble. A couple days later Skipper told me that the consensus opinion of the senior pilots was that Tom was most probably not able to get his head safely back against the seat's head rest because he had to motor his seat all the way up to see over the A-6's cockpit. Tom would have had to use the lower ejection handle and therefore his head would have bent forward at ejection. Consensus was that Tom had broken his neck on ejection and that was why he was unconscious in the water when the rescue jumper arrived to help him. To say the least, I was devastated and confused about everything that happened. Only on my second cruise did I learn the entire story from the rescue crew's viewpoint.

I nearly had my second ejection in the span of three days. Shortly after the accident my Skipper sat me down and told me the Navy could not afford to let me return stateside for the memorial service, because of Russian activity, etc. My wife Nancy had flown across the country to stay with Tom's wife and their two children, to help with the rest of the family and to plan the service. An AirLant Admiral told her why I could not return. Skipper then told me it was

important for me to get back on the horse. I was scheduled to fly that afternoon with a Vietnam A-6 legend, CDR Gerry Hesse. Gerry was our squadron Ops Boss. Only two days after the accident I sat in the plane next to him for an afternoon sortie. As a nugget B/N, I had some trepidation to say the least, but I had confidence in Gerry's years and years of experience and in the A-6's ejection seat. As we taxied up behind the JBD we were behind an A-3D Sky Warrior. I had flown many hours in the A-3D in airborne radar school at Albany, Georgia. I turned to Gerry and said something like "It's sure good to have ejection seats compared to the guys in the A-3D who are stuck with having to jump out of a hole in the bottom of the aircraft". Gerry replied, "No John the A-3 is a fantastic plane. I flew it for hundreds of hours and never had a problem." We sat watching the A-3 run up its engines and the Cat officer giving his signal to launch. Now, fifty years later, I can still see that huge airplane slowly going down the catapult and never gaining enough speed to get airborne; then just rolling over the bow of the carrier and disappearing from sight. Gerry and I both looked at each other and said "holy shit" in unison, and then awaited instructions from Pri-Fli. The flight ops commander came on line and said "Gerry, we know what the problem was and you guys are clear to take the Cat". Gerry replied, "Bill, I don't think we are going anywhere". Bill came back confidently "The problem was a human failure on the steam bleed switch, so we are confident you can launch safely". Having gone through an ejection two days earlier I steeled myself for a possible second and made sure I was mentally ready to pull the handle again. Then Gerry rather forcefully said, "Bill, I don't care what you guys think right now, we are not going down the catapult until you shoot that big piece of concrete off the front end to prove everything and everybody is working correctly". Later I found out the carrier's CO thought that was a good idea too and flight ops were scrubbed for the day. Everybody except one chief petty officer in the A-3 died after being run over by a 45,000-ton aircraft carrier, operating at flank speed.

As for the reason for the engine fire warning and accident, we found out some years later that the cross-over bleed line had failed and disconnected from the port engine because of the V-band clamp failing, resulting in super-hot exhaust air escaping from the open line. V-Band clamps are similar to the clamps that hold a clothes dryer's vent hose on to the exhaust opening to the outside, but a lot larger and stronger. Operations at sea where salt air constantly bathed the clamps created corrosion in the band that actually started from the inside, and could not be detected by engine maintenance inspections. It was only when aircraft having the same failure as we had at sea could be inspected on land that the defective clamps were discovered. It was assumed that several aircraft went to the bottom of the sea with the same problem, but could never be recovered for verification. With that information all A-6s were grounded for replacement of V-band clamps.

As for what happened in the failed rescue of Tom Williams, we actually didn't learn more of the story until our second cruise. That cruise my wife and four other wives followed the ship around the Med. She had met the wife of a helo pilot who had been in the helo squadron the previous cruise. We spent time with the couple, and in conversation while sharing my story, the helo pilot told us about the failed rescue. He said the big problem was that the very young "jumper" in his desire to quickly get to Tom, jumped from too high. In so doing he hurt his back going into the water and was almost in a survival situation himself. The second thing that went

very wrong was that Tom's parachute shroud lines were all over the place and dangerously close to the A-6 that was drifting toward him and the rescue crewman. Tom was floating passed out and the injured crewman was trying desperately to do his best to cut him free from the shroud lines. The tow line from the helo had been attached to Tom before all the lines were cut free. Then, after having floated for some five to ten minutes, suddenly the plane started to sink. It appeared that the plane had become entangled in the lines and was now a real time risk to both Tom and the rescuer. The rescuer realized that Tom was not going to be cleared of the lines and was being pulled under, while also pulling on the cable from the helo--creating a risk that the helo could be pulled down. In a no-win crisis situation, the rescuer had to remove the cable from Tom and tragically watch him disappear below the surface. According to the helo pilot the rescue crewman later had a mental breakdown from the experience, and had to leave the Navy.