

Gold Cup Roll

By LCdr. Michael Barretta

The Model 367-80, known by its designers as the Dash 80, roars over Lake Washington at 400 feet and 400 knots. The graceful swept-wing prototype airliner pitches up, rolls inverted and then upright, amazing the thousands of spectators that have come to see the 1955 Seafair Gold Cup hydroplane races.

For good measure, Alvin M. “Tex” Johnston, the test pilot flying the aircraft, rolls the 160,000-pound plane again. Boeing President William Allen, escorting potential buyers, is stunned and horrified as he watches Boeing’s entire future, embodied in the airliner, corkscrew through the sky. Airline representatives, delighted by the impromptu performance and impressed by the speed, strength, and obvious maneuverability of the aircraft flood the company with orders.

Years later, the Dash 80, magnificently restored, is ensconced at the National Air and Space Museum’s Steven F. Udvar-Hazy Center near Washington Dulles International Airport. Engineers and aviation aficionados alike still debate the roll, completely unplanned except in the mind of its test pilot. Was it an aileron roll or a true barrel roll? What is not debated is that the daring example of flattening established Boeing as the premier manufacturer of jet airliners.

Imagine if it had all gone differently. The 128-foot-long airliner begins its roll and slices through the air, losing altitude. With just over 270 degrees of roll complete, a wingtip drags through Lake Washington. The aircraft disintegrates in an explosion of spray and fire and then sinks to the bottom of the lake, taking Boe-

ing’s future with it. If the roll had gone poorly, perhaps “Tex” Johnston would be vilified as the man who made Boeing the world’s largest manufacturer of washing machines.

Flying is magnificent. The urge to push the limits, please the crowd, or become the ace of the base is almost overwhelming. Most aviators resist the siren call and satisfy themselves with merely getting the job done. Grabbing an OK 3-wire or jumping SEALs on time and in-position is good enough. A mission accomplished is its own reward.

Others succumb to the showman lurking inside every aviator: An impromptu FA-18 airshow over the town of Petaluma, Calif., terrorizes and amazes its citizens in equal measure; an SH-60B crosses the stern of a *Perry*-class frigate so low that rotor blades hit the deck. Unlike the famous Gold Cup Roll, the shows for these naval aviators ended badly. Field naval aviator evaluation boards (FNEABs), JAG, and mishap investigations were the only rewards waiting at the end of the flight deck.

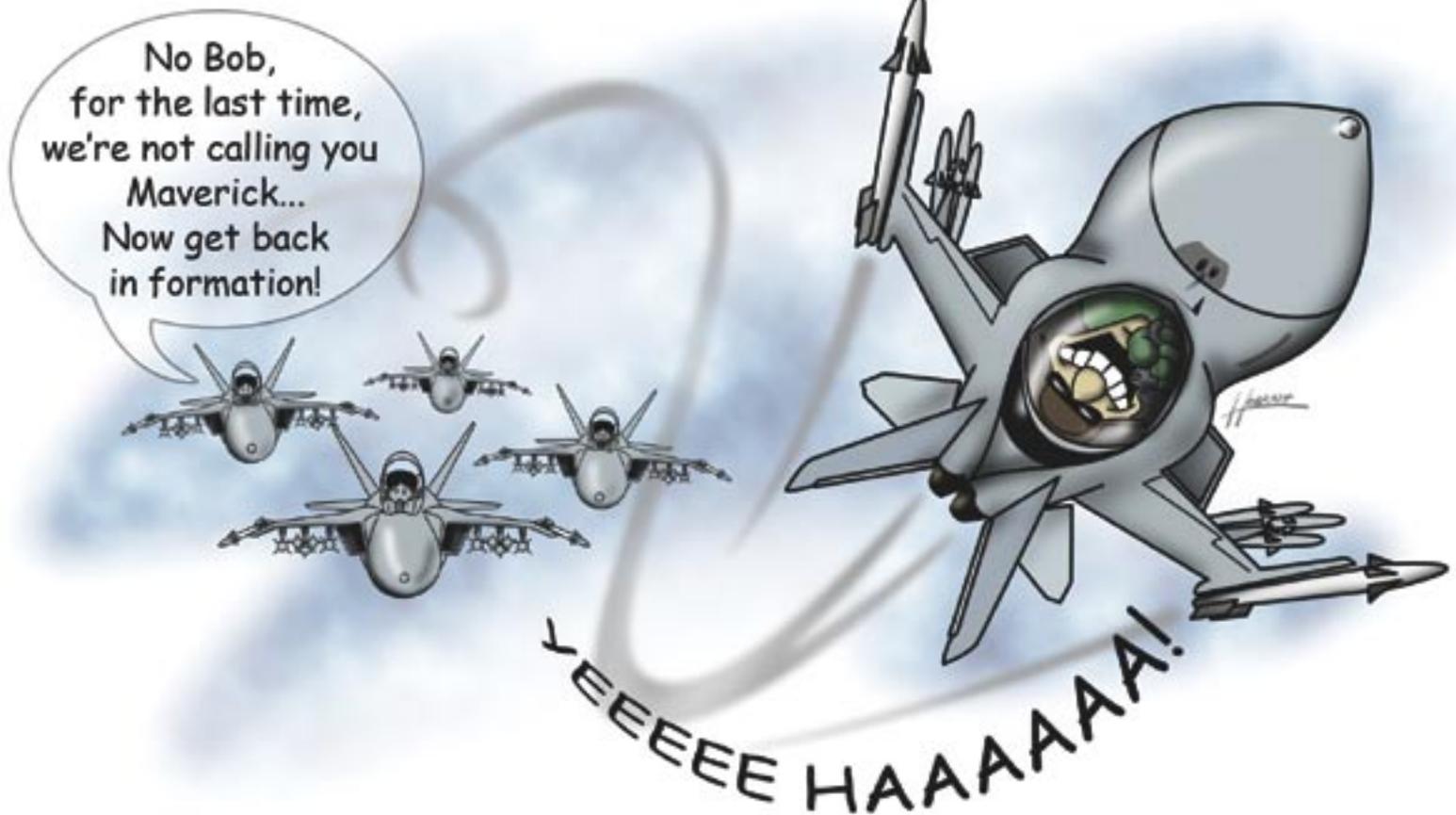
The best outcome for an embarrassed and disgraced aviator is the loss of hard-earned trust and flight qualifications. The worst outcome, if not death, is court-martial, loss of career, and loss of wings. There is, after all, a reason

why warfare insignia are fastened with pins and Velcro; they can come off a lot easier than they go on.

Any naval aviator worth his salt can appreciate and marvel at the sheer audacity of the Gold Cup Roll; however, flatthating is not likely to enshrine you in any aviation hall of fame. Only a rare set of circumstances will tolerate such a display. In all likelihood, a moment of cheap glory can have horrible personal and national consequences. Naval aircraft and aviators are

wanted your aircraft to simply go straight and level, he wouldn't have made so much sky. By all means, explore the established envelope and fly the aircraft to its NATOPS-designed limits. If you feel the need to be heroic and step outside the box, have a very good reason. The only individual who truly and genuinely should be in awe of your airmanship is the enemy, and he shouldn't marvel for very long—it's rude to keep him waiting.

"Tex" Johnston died in 1998 at the age of 84. He



expensive and represent an investment in our nation's warfighting capability. Each aircraft and aviator is precious; to risk one for personal aggrandizement is a criminal act. For want of a nail, the battle is lost. For want of a naval aircraft, a mission goes unfulfilled. When a mission goes unfulfilled, Marines, Soldiers, Sailors, and Airmen die. The same chain links that apply to safety easily can be applied to the criminal misuse of naval aircraft.

Of course, the pendulum swings both ways. Wimps need not apply to the profession; after all, if God had

was fortunate to have been born in the golden age of aviation and to have been skilled enough to survive a career that claimed many of his contemporaries. Perhaps he thoroughly understood the capabilities of the aircraft and made a shrewd decision that catapulted Boeing to the forefront of aviation. Or, maybe he succumbed to his inner showman and discounted the investment of thousands of Boeing's employees to build the benchmark airliner of the times. I prefer to believe the former, rather than the latter. 🛩️

LCdr. Barretta flies with HT-8.