

# ...and then there were none...

*November 1955*



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It was a “routine” flight by members of a reserve squadron. Eight pilots were scheduled. Seven got airborne. Five continued the flight to various unscheduled conclusions. One pilot died.

In terms of experience and backgrounds, the pilots represented a typical cross-section of reserve aviation. The list included a manager of an electrical supply firm, the director of industrial relations for an oil refinery, an associate of a farmers’ cooperative supply organization, and the director of a local chamber of commerce. Married, family men almost without exception, these pilots engage in three or four flights and log an average of about 10 flight hours per month.

Our story begins with

eight reserve pilots who were scheduled for a VFR flight to provide cruise control training in F9F-7s prior to engaging in forthcoming maneuvers. Planned for several months, the flight received final approval and pilots were designated about 1030 one Saturday morning. Because of this short notice, the squadron had to get two replacement pilots from a local companion squadron. One of the replacements was designated flight leader because he had the necessary instrument qualification required for such flights.

Of the eight pilots scheduled, three had flown a hop previously during the day. Only four had made cross-country flights in the F9F-7. Here was the lineup:

- **No. 1:** (flight leader) received checkout in F9F-7 two months before and had logged 10.7 hours in model.
- **No. 2:** Checked out in model a year previously and had about 60 hours in model.
- **No. 3, 4, 6 and 8:** Checked out in model previous year and had between 20 and 40 hours in model.
- **No. 5:** Checked out about two months before and had approximately 20 hours in model.
- **No. 7:** Checked out about three months before; had about five hours in model.

The 555-mile flight approached mountainous terrain near the destination. A tornado was well to the southwest, and scattered thunderstorms were predicted en route. Time en route was one hour 30 minutes, with the flight to arrive over destination with an estimated

1840 pounds of fuel remaining. Most of the pilots worked out their own flight plans, with the flight leader completing a briefing “as thorough as any flight I ever briefed,” he said.

One aircraft was delayed on starting and was left at the line. Radio communications check proved difficult, with considerable shifting of frequency required to establish a common tactical channel. At the head of the runway, there was an initial delay of several minutes while a number of aircraft landed. Takeoff was at 1705. The leader circled the field at low altitude to check the status of the delayed aircraft, which hadn’t left the line. One flight member figured that some 800 pounds of fuel had been expended during delays.

### **Then There Were Seven**

Departure and climb to 36,000 feet on a northwest course were uneventful. After 110 miles, No. 5 and No. 6 reported excessive fuel consumption and returned to base. No. 7 moved up into the No. 5 position.

### **Then There Were Five**

After 200 miles, the flight encountered the first thunderstorm, an anvil head at 32,000-to-34,000 feet, which they were able to drop under without difficulty. They flew over several small thunderheads. Weather to the north and east of course appeared relatively clear. Weather at the destination was a comfortable 15,000 feet, scattered, with thunderstorms to the southeast.

Noting what appeared to be a sizable thunderstorm ahead, the flight began climbing to top it. At this time No. 5 began to lag behind. When the flight had attained 38,000-to-40,000 feet and nearing the thunderstorm, the flight leader reduced power to 87 percent to let No. 5 catch up. No. 5 gave a count for a DF steer from the planes ahead, which he could no longer see. No. 3 and No. 4 overran and used their excess speed to pull up slightly higher than the rest of the flight. No. 3 reported that he was encountering stall in his airplane, as did No. 5. One pilot—possibly No. 3—suggested reversal of course, but No. 4, who was higher than the others, reported he could see over the top of the thunderstorm. The leader began a left turn, immediately aggravating the stall of the aircraft. Mushing considerably, the flight entered the cloud, No. 2 entering first, followed by No. 1. No. 4 held course and attitude. No. 3 may have elected to descend through the clouds. No. 5 attempted a 180 but stalled through the tops of the thunderhead at 39,000 feet.

Each pilot found himself with a different set of problems.

### **Losing the Leader**

Completing his turn away from the cloud and circling in the clear at 34,000-to-36,000, No. 1 tried to call the flight but couldn’t make radio contact. He descended into the trough paralleling the near side of the cloud, throttle at idle, and leveled at 17,000 feet to go around the edge of the thunderhead and to resume course. He realized, however, that his 1500 pounds of fuel weren’t enough and began looking for a place to land. He found a highway, descended to 5,000 feet and checked for obstructions. Then he made an approach over a pickup truck and touched down, blowing a tire as he hit the brakes. He turned off the highway at an intersection, got a ride into town, and hired a tractor to tow the plane. He then learned that an aircraft had crashed 40 miles away. He headed for the scene.

### **Then There Were Four**

No. 2 had elected to descend through what he assumed to be only a layer, hoping to bust out under. He began a 5,000-to-6,000 fpm rate of descent. He ran into lightning and severe turbulence. He tried to hold the nose down to prevent stalling. He then began worrying about his altitude—below 15,000 feet, he would be dangerously near to the mountains ahead. He turned north into more violent turbulence, lost control a couple of times and decided to eject at 15,000 feet. He jettisoned his canopy, lost his helmet (he didn’t remember when), and pulled the curtain. Nothing happened, even after the expected two- or three-second delay in the firing of the seat. He peeked around the curtain to see if he were still in the airplane. He released the curtain, waited, still diving, and went back to driving the airplane.

The sight of the ground below showed that he still had a safe altitude. Breaking out at 5,500 feet, he headed east at low speed (since he had no canopy). He selected a stretch of highway near a town as an emergency runway. He was down to 500 pounds of fuel. He approached over an automobile at 150 feet, cut the throttle and landed. Taxiing, he folded the wings to cross a bridge and continued into town where he parked on a side street.

Mechs from a nearby air station brought another canopy, fuel, and a starter unit. Local citizens pushed the airplane back to the highway. After taking off, the pilot said, “I came back and made a pass by the town to

do a roll of appreciation for their help.”

### Then There Were *Three*

No. 3 had crashed in a near-vertical angle on the corner of a cement foundation of a farm structure. The farm owner soon complained about the crowds of spectators and souvenir hunters, so the wreckage was bulldozed into the hole it had dug when it hit the building. The pilot was later found, dead of injuries that may have been caused by hitting some part of the plane on bailout.

### Then There Were *Two*



Arrangements were made with a nearby air station for repairs.

No. 4 had said he could see over the top of the cloud, but he stalled and began to lose altitude. He increased power to 100 percent but stayed in a descent. A tentative turn increased the stall. He entered the storm, descending at 4,000 fpm, to save fuel. He turned to parallel the mountains, encountering violent turbulence. Calling “Mayday,” he got a weather check from an Air Force B-25, which gave him



When the airplane was again ready for flight, it was pushed to the highway by local citizens.



As the aircraft took off down the highway, everyone in town came out to take pictures of the unusual event.

some idea of weather beyond the storm area.

He got a fuel warning light at 12,000 feet, and broke out a thousand feet later. Down to 700 pounds of fuel, he circled a reservoir and considered a water ditching. He opted to try to land on top of the dam, which was 25 feet wide and nearly 10,000 feet long. The water was 15 feet beneath one side. The other side featured a 250-foot drop, with a 3-foot guardrail along the edge. He landed, stayed off the brakes, and taxied off the far end of the dam. An irate official ran out of a building and said, “Son, you’re in *trouble!* You can’t go landing on government property like this!”

### Then There Was *One*

No. 5 had entered the storm at 39,000 feet and 170 knots, stalling through the tops of the clouds. Flying on instruments, he hit violent turbulence. At one point, the aircraft flipped. He emerged from the clouds at 17,000 feet in a slight nosedown turn, slow enough to stall. He nosed over to pick up speed. He eventually landed at an abandoned airstrip, with only 700 pounds of fuel. He found a house and arranged for fuel to be brought to the airstrip. He returned to base... and then there were none.

*The original editor’s note said “The Aviation Safety Center is indebted to the pilots who voluntarily provided this candid account for the benefit of other pilots.” We have slightly shortened the text of the original story. – Ed.* ◀