

Vertigo In A Hellcat

2/24/16: Today while visiting with Jack, he related this incident to me.

Jack was flying an F6F Hellcat out of Barbers Point Hawaii on a training mission along with several other Hellcats. Their mission was to do a “surprise attack” on an Army base on Oahu. There was an overcast at about 2,000 feet. Their “squadron” was above the overcast (Jack didn’t say how they knew their position). They dove down through the overcast to strafe the Army base, with Jack flying “tail end Charlie”. Jack broke out of the clouds and strafed the base as planned, but at the last minute decided to give the Army guys a real show, so pulled up vertically and entered into a roll, disappearing into the clouds with a full-power vertical rolling maneuver.



As soon as Jack entered the clouds he got completely disoriented – vertigo! He had no idea the attitude of his plane and became dizzy and somewhat nauseated. Was he climbing, diving, rolling, inverted, or what? The vertigo affected him with fuzzy thinking. For an instant he had a mini panic attack! He seemed to be thrown all about in the cockpit so knew he wasn’t straight-n-level. Then he managed to collect himself to the point where he thought “How I am going to get myself out this?!?” So here’s what he did.

The artificial horizon had tumbled, so was completely useless. However he did have a needle and ball, ascent/descent and altimeter gauges. So first he stopped rolling using the needle and ball along with physical location of the stick. When he got the needle and ball centered he looked at the climb and descent gauge, which was pegged at full down. The altimeter gauge also showed rapid descent, and the compass was spinning. But was he inverted or what? Figuring he had a 50/50 chance, he locked the fingers of both hands around the stick and pulled back as hard as he could. I asked him if he throttled off, but he didn’t remember as the whole incident is still somewhat off a hazy daze from the vertigo.



Keeping the needle and ball centered, he continued to pull hard on the stick with both hands while watching the air speed, altimeter and climb/descent gauges. The latter two indicated he was slowly pulling out of a dive. All indications were that he wasn’t turning (compass, needle/ball, etc.). He was still feeling sick, dizzy, and disoriented – and his brain thusly affected.

As he pulled on the stick so hard he almost bent it, the climb & descent gauge came off the bottom peg, and the altimeter slowed spinning in the negative, he figured (and hoped) that he was out over the ocean. He broke out of the clouds and saw that the needle and ball were correct – no spin. He watched the altimeter go past 1,000 feet, then 500 feet, then 200 feet. The climb & descent gauge was slowly working towards neutral. One hundred feet. Jack was in a cold sweat! Very slowly the altimeter crept past 50 feet. Then at 20 feet it began to climb back up, and the climb & descent showed a climb! [Jack later went back and flew what he thought was 20 feet over the water and his altimeter showed -20, so he had a few more feet than he thought.]

Jack climbed his Hellcat back up to just below the cloud cover and leveled off. Yes, he was out over the ocean – but where? His head and body were not recovered from the effects of the vertigo, so he just flew around trying to calm down. As his senses slowly recovered, he figured he was South of Oahu, so headed North. Shortly the island came in sight, and he headed toward where he guesstimated Barbers Point was.

After finding Barbers Point he radioed in for permission to land. He landed, taxied to the parking area, and parked the Hellcat. After shutting down he just sat there for a while as he was still not back to “normal”. Finally he climbed out and went into the pilot area. Jack anticipated that everybody would rush around him asking where he had been! Actually, nobody said anything to him. They didn’t even notice he hadn’t landed with the training squadron! Jack never told anybody what happened.

== Roy Pettit ==

P.S. This story illustrates why Jack is still alive after 55,000 hours of flying. It’s in his nature not to panic, but to reason how to get out of a bad situation (Not to mention he is very lucky!). When I told Jack this he said “Oh, I panicked all right!” But the thing is, it was only for an instant, then either through instinct or training, he did the right thing to save himself (OK, the true right thing would have been to not try the stunt in the first place). The recovery method he used in this incident eventually migrated to a similar recovery method he taught his Radio Control student flyers. When in trouble in the air: 1. Throttle off; 2. Level your wings; 3. Pull up to see if inverted, then roll out accordingly; 4. Pull out if in a dive. Optional step 5. Hand your transmitter over to somebody else to land. I’ve used this method successfully several times, but always forget step-1 until people start yelling “Throttle, Throttle!”