

## Aviation Legends

by Stephan Wilkinson

Accounts of ghostly, mysterious aircraft guiding battle-damaged mates to safety constitute a category of their own among aviation urban legends, and it's a good bet that Frederick Forsyth embroidered one of them to create his novella *The Shepherd*, the story of a Royal Air Force Vampire pilot flying from Germany back to England on Christmas Eve of 1957. Lost atop an undercast, his radio inoperative and fuel rapidly disappearing, he suddenly saw a sleek de Havilland Mosquito fighter-bomber appear out of the night and slip alongside, its beacon winking and navigation lights dots of color in the darkness.

The pilot silhouetted in the Mosquito's cockpit gestured, then led the Vampire down through the clouds, where the lights of a runway glowed directly ahead. The Mosquito arced back up into the clouds as the Vampire touched down at what turned out to be a little-used RAF station. Later, on the wall of the deserted officers' mess, the Vampire pilot saw a photo of the very same Mosquito and learned that it and its pilot had never returned from a mission over Germany on December 24, 1943.

In 1956, the crew of a Royal Navy four-engine Shackleton patrol bomber nearing the end of a long, boring maritime surveillance flight spotted a U.S. aircraft carrier and decided to fake an approach. They lowered the landing gear, turned on their lights, and lined up, descending steadily toward the deck. While the pilots watched in horror, sailors rushed onto the deck and pushed a dozen jet fighters over the edge in preparation for what they assumed would be an emergency landing.

A Navy fighter was making a night launch from a carrier using a newfangled device, a steam catapult. The pilot was a nervous ensign, and when the catapult misfired, the airplane was held back by the bridle and only made it to the carrier's bow, the nose of the airplane flopping just over the edge of the deck. The terrified young pilot put the gear up, held full power, and tried to thunder on into the blackness, wondering why his airspeed indicator was only showing 25 knots.

Meanwhile, a deckhand clawed his way up onto the fighter's wingwalk into the hurricane of propwash and banged on the canopy, signaling the pilot to cut the throttle. The ensign took one look at the yellow-jacketed apparition standing on his wing, blew the canopy, and bailed out, getting a nasty knock when he dove head-first onto the deck.

A C-130 figures in a classic involving a senior Naval officer who is logging his very occasional stick time by flying one of his squadron's Hercules on a training mission. The aircraft is being flown on instruments between two cloud layers with no horizon visible when air traffic control reports opposite-direction traffic, a flight of six: the Blue Angels en route to a show. The Blues roll inverted as the C-130 comes into sight and blast past upside down. The last they see of the Hercules, over their shoulders, it's rolling past the vertical, on its way to inverted flight. The elderly commander at the yoke has decided he must be doing something wrong.

An Air Corps instructor was infamous for making a show of throwing his Stearman's joystick over the side and forcing his new student to land the airplane unassisted. One student, already a civilian pilot, was wise to this and secreted an extra stick in his own cockpit. When the instructor unfastened and tossed out his control stick, the student did the same thing with his decoy. Horrified, the instructor bailed out, while the gleeful student spiraled around the descending parachute and went on to land.

In 1959, the pilot of a corporate Twin Beech making a late-night solo flight from Los Angeles to Albuquerque in smooth, clear skies put the airplane on autopilot and went back into the luxurious cabin to read a book. When the airplane was jostled briefly by a spot of turbulence, the pilot watched with horror as the cockpit door swung closed and latched--from the cockpit side. Desperately using a pocketknife as a screwdriver, he was able to unscrew the door hinges and get back into the cockpit just in time to switch from the near-empty auxiliary fuel tanks back to the main tanks.