The Last Flight

During my tenure in the Navy from June 1957 to March 1961, I served in VQ-1 from May 1958 to June 1960.    I worked in maintenance on the R-4360’s and after a year started to fly as a plane captain on the P4M-1Q’s.  In about April or May 1960 one of the P4M’s came back from a flight with a gripe of difficulty in taxing because of a dragging port brake system.  That night the maintenance crew worked on the brakes and the night duty officer took the aircraft out to a taxi strip for a checkout.  Everything seemed okay and the gripe was signed off.

The next day one of our officers was scheduled to return to Japan from a trip back to the States.  As this was just a ferry trip, a made up crew was assigned to meet him and return to Iwakuni.  I think the destination was Atsugi as best as I can remember.  We were using a short crew of pilot, co-pilot, radar man, radioman, plane captain and a fire watch in the rear of the aircraft.  I was assigned as plane captain and the fire watch was a kid just entering the squadron and had never flown in a P4M.  I remember giving him a mike and headset and probably a few instructions (how to lock the rear hatch and where the emergency exit was located).

During taxi and takeoff the brake system worked okay.  As we approached our destination, we were put in a holding pattern because of a severe rainstorm.  When the storm cleared, we received instructions to land.  As we were preparing to land, the pilot instructed me to check the brake valves while he pressed the brake pedals.  The valves were located just forward of the rudder controls, pilot side, and I could feel fluid flowing through the valves while he pressed the brake pedals.  I gave him a thumbs up signal, and we continued our approach.  I did not realize that although the fluid was flowing to the brakes, it was not returning through the quick release system.

As we touched down on the wet runway, everything seemed to be normal for a few seconds.  Since it was a customary practice for the plane captain to monitor the engine fuel mixtures during taxi because the R4360’s were prone to foul plugs after landing and taxing on a rich mixture at low RPM’s, I was standing in the passage way to the navigator’s compartment between the pilot and co-pilot.  My first indication that something was wrong was when the pilot took the starboard engine to full reverse.

That was when I hit my ditching station against the navigator’s compartment hatch.  The next few seconds was a wild ride as we skidded off the runway, through a large drainage ditch full of water, and came to rest on a taxiway exit.   As it turned out, the port brake was locked solid on touchdown.

Immediately, everyone exited and I remember going out over the starboard

wing and sliding down the wing flap that was still extended.  As we counted heads, we realized the kid in the rear was still on board.  The P4M had a rear emergency exit window on the port side for the rear crew.  I ran around to check and he was sitting on a table and kicking for all his worth trying to kick the window out.  The window was equipped with two pull-tabs at the top.  After I got his attention, he was able to pull the window out and jump to the ground.  He was scared to death because he had been subjected to flying spark plugs, hydraulic pumps, and other essentials necessary to maintain the plane when we were away from Iwakuni.

Damage to the aircraft was a bent starboard landing gear, damaged starboard prop, and most probably a damaged starboard jet engine as the jet door was open when we went through the drainage ditch.  The engine picked up a large amount of gravel and water.

I remember spending the night and catching the daily mail plane back to Iwakuni.  I left VQ-1 a short time later and saw the crippled old bird still parked by a hanger.

Due to the decision to phase out the P4M’s, I doubt very seriously that this plane was ever repaired for service again.  Therefore it was its last flight.  At that time we already had one or two WV-2Q super constellations to use for training.

Please send this to all members and see if other crewmembers of this flight can add any other details.

Hubert Hunter