

"Pilot Down, Presumed Dead"

Screenplay by James C. Peters and Robert M. Blevins

Based on the novel "Pilot Down, Presumed Dead" by Marjorie  
Phleger

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FADE IN

EXT. SMALL MEXICAN AIRPORT, NEAR A PARKED CESSNA - DAY

SUPER - La Paz, Baja California - 1963

Young American pilot STEVE FERRIS walks around the Cessna, wiggles on the flaps and tail, examining the aircraft closely. A young Mexican worker standing on a ladder fills a wing tank from a large gas can.

STEVE FERRIS

Make sure you top those tanks off good, MIGUEL. It's a long way back to San Diego.

MIGUEL

It's getting late in the day, Senor Ferris. Maybe you should wait until morning?

FERRIS

No. I have to get back right away. Got a little date tonight at my favorite restaurant. FERRIS reaches into the open door of the Cessna and takes out a clipboard on the seat.

Inter cut with...

CLOSE ON THE CLIPBOARD OVER FERRIS' SHOULDER

It's a weather report showing clear skies from La Paz to San Diego. Attached next to it is a picture of a brunette woman.

MIGUEL (V.O.)

(looks down at Ferris from the ladder)

Ah. The famous Barbara.

BACK TO SCENE

FERRIS

(touches picture with fingers)

That's right.

Miguel finishes pouring gasoline into the wing tank and sets the can on the ground.

(CONTINUED)

MIGUEL

The tanks are full, Senor Ferris.

FERRIS

Thanks, Miguel.

Ferris puts on sunglasses and then tips Miguel a few bills. The Mexican smiles and shoves the money into his pocket. Miguel looks up at the sky and shakes his head.

MIGUEL

This is the time of the chubasco. I think it may be coming today.

FERRIS

Chubasco? What's a chubasco?

MIGUEL

A storm. The air feels heavy today, like before a chubasco.

Miguel kneels down and reverses the nozzle on the gas can, inserting the nozzle into the can and screwing it shut. He picks up the can.

FERRIS

(looks at the sky briefly)  
Nothing but blue skies, Miguel. You been listening to your grandmother's aching knee again?

MIGUEL

She is a wise woman, Senor Ferris. Be careful today.

FERRIS

(smiles and pats Miguel on shoulder)

Tell you what. I'll drop by the tower again and double-check that weather report. Okay?

Miguel walks away carrying the gas can, headed for a nearby hangar.

MIGUEL

(over shoulder)  
Have a good flight home, Senor Ferris.

Ferris walks across the tarmac in the opposite direction, to the flight control tower.

INT. CONTROL TOWER - MOMENTS LATER

Two bored-looking Mexicans are working in the main office. One is talking on a radio transmitter in Spanish, the other is typing a letter. Ferris walks up to the counter and lays down his clipboard.

FERRIS

Hi guys. Any updates on the weather? Miguel thinks we might have thunderstorms moving in.

JOSE is typing on an old Underwood. He stops what he is doing and looks over at Ferris. It's obvious both he and the RADIOMAN know Ferris well.

JOSE THE TYPIST

(laughs)

Let me guess. He's been talking to his grandmother again. I wouldn't worry, Steve. It's supposed to be clear skies all the way up the coast.

Jose shuffles through some papers until he finds a particular one. He reads from it by rote.

JOSE

Clear skies, no ceiling, winds southwest at five knots. Visibility unlimited.

FERRIS

I figured as much. Usual flight plan then. I'm following the coast VFR. I'll check in at Customs at Lindbergh.

RADIOMAN

(attention on radio)

How many tourists did you bring down this time?

FERRIS

A full load. One guy's fishing pole was so long I almost hung it out the window. I made him bend it over and tie it off. He worried it was gonna break the whole way down here.

(laughs)

Ferris picks up his clipboard, checks his watch, and makes a quick notation on the clipboard.

(CONTINUED)

FERRIS  
(continues)  
Thanks, guys. See you in a few  
days.

JOSE  
(waves)  
Have a good flight.

RADIOMAN  
(on the radio with someone,  
waves at Ferris)  
Adios, Steve!

EXT. TARMAC OUTSIDE OF OFFICE - CONTINUOUS

Ferris walks across the field to the Cessna and climbs  
inside, shuts door firmly, belts himself in.

INT. CESSNA - CONTINUOUS

On the passenger-side floorboard is a basket with a  
one-gallon plastic bottle of water, a few bananas, some  
oranges, and two candy bars in a basket. A box of saltine  
crackers is on the passenger seat. He puts on his headphones  
and starts running up the engine.

FERRIS  
La Paz tower, this is Cessna  
November six four nine Delta  
Charlie requesting permission for  
takeoff.

RADIOMAN (V.O.)  
Six four nine Delta Charlie, you  
are cleared for takeoff on runway  
two. Winds are west at six knots,  
visibility unlimited.

Ferris eases the throttle forward on the Cessna and begins  
to taxi toward his assigned runway.

FERRIS  
Thank you, La Paz.

The plane gains speed quickly and as Ferris pulls back on  
the wheel, it jumps into the sky.

EXT. AIRPORT - LONG - CONTINUOUS

The Cessna climbs away from the airport with its motor ROARING and turns west. WE SEE the plane flying over desert scrub as it heads toward the coast.

INT. CESSNA - SOME TIME LATER

Ferris approaches the west coast of Baja California and looks out the window.

Inter cut with...

INT. CESSNA - CONTINUOUS

Ferris sees the beaches, islands, and blue water of the Baja coast.

BACK TO SCENE

Ferris turns the plane north to follow the coast. He settles back in his seat and tries to relax.

INT. CESSNA - SOME TIME LATER

Storm clouds appear out to sea. There is THUNDER and LIGHTNING and they are moving toward the coast fast.

FERRIS

That's funny. It was calm as a millpond on the way down this morning.

(switches on radio and adjusts dial)

FERRIS

(continues)

La Paz, this is Cessna November six four nine Delta Charlie. Do you read? (static, no reply)

FERRIS

(continues)

La Paz, this is Cessna November six four nine Delta Charlie. Do you read? (static, no reply)

Ferris gives up on the radio and shakes open a flight map with one hand while keeping the other on the control wheel.

Inter cut with... CLOSE ON THE MAP. Ferris taps on a spot marked Guerrero Negro.

BACK TO SCENE

FERRIS

That's it, then. Guerrero Negro.

(switches on radio)

(continues)

La Paz, this is Cessna November six  
four nine Delta Charlie. I don't  
know if you can hear me, but  
there's one big storm coming in  
from the west. I'm going to keep  
following the coast up to Guerrero  
Negro and try to land there until  
it passes. Do you copy?

(static, no reply)

INT. CESSNA - SOME TIME LATER

A huge storm is now buffeting the Cessna, tossing it around the sky like a rag doll. Rain pelts the windscreen and visibility is zero. Ferris fights the controls. The instruments are spinning.

Inter cut with...

CLOSE - ALTIMETER

The altimeter needle is showing a rapid descent as the aircraft is forced downward by the SHRIEKING WINDS.

BACK TO SCENE

FERRIS

(fights for control of the  
aircraft)

Come on! Come on!

Inter cut with...

EXT. CESSNA - CONTINUOUS

The aircraft is pushed down hard by the STORM, ENGINE SCREAMING. The ocean is visible a couple of hundred feet below, with whitecaps

INT. CESSNA - CONTINUOUS

Ferris sees the ocean coming up fast. He opens the throttle to the limit and pulls back on the control wheel. Ten feet above the water, the Cessna finally levels out. Storm is now at near-hurricane force. The plane begins to climb, but slowly. The aircraft is still pitching.

FERRIS  
 (pulling back on control wheel  
 hard)  
 Up! Up! Come on! Get up!

Inter cut with...

CLOSE ON THE ALTIMETER

The needle is crawling upward again.

BACK TO SCENE

Ferris gains some altitude and climbs away from the sea. The storm continues to pound the aircraft and visibility outside is zero, but he has regained some control.

FERRIS  
 (sighs in relief)  
 Okay. Okay. Gotta get some  
 altitude.  
 (squints at windscreen)  
 (continues)  
 Where the hell am I? Can't see a  
 damn thing out there!

Inter cut with...

EXT. CESSNA - CONTINUOUS

WE SEE the plane being blown out to sea by the storm, instead of hugging the coast.

INT. CESSNA - CONTINUOUS

The plane enters the EYE OF THE HURRICANE and steadies up. The wind and rain disappear, although the Cessna is still encircled closely on all sides by black clouds and lightning. A beach appears in the distance. Ferris leans forward, trying to see if the beach is real or illusion. The plane is thrown around hard as the storm picks up again after its brief respite. The engine begins to cut out, but Ferris works the controls and regains power. Ferris sees the beach as it comes closer.

(CONTINUED)

FERRIS

That's it, then.

(switches on radio)

Mayday, mayday. This is Cessna  
November six four nine Delta  
Charlie. I am declaring an  
emergency. My position is eighty  
miles north of Magdalena Bay. Any  
station please respond.

(tries adjusting radio)

(continues)

Mayday, mayday. This is Cessna  
November six four nine Delta  
Charlie. I am making an emergency  
landing on the Baja coast about  
eighty miles north of Magdalena  
Bay. Any station, please respond.  
(no response)

Ferris turns the plane until he is lined up with the beach and starts his descent. The wind and rain suddenly return at full force and buffet the aircraft. The engine begins to cut out again, and as before, Ferris works the controls until the motor regains power.

Inter cut with...

EXT. BEACH - DAY - CONTINUOUS

Huge waves are breaking on the shore. The beach looks suitable for a landing. The Cessna turns toward it.

BACK TO SCENE

Ferris reaches down and sets the flaps for landing. He tightens his harness.

Inter cut with...

INT. CESSNA - DAY - CONTINUOUS

Ferris is looking directly out the front windscreen and WE SEE the beach coming up fast.

BACK TO SCENE

Ferris braces himself and pulls back on the wheel a bit.

FERRIS

Hope the sand's firm enough. Here  
we go.

EXT. BEACH - CONTINUOUS

The plane descends sharply and skims along the beach. The wheels touch the ground and throw up dust clouds. The plane bounces twice, but with its progress suddenly arrested by soft sand, it begins to flip over.

BACK TO SCENE

As the plane is going over, Ferris leans sideways and switches off the ignition. The plane BANGS over onto its top with its ROARING propeller CHOPPING into the sand and then stopping cold. Ferris is knocked unconscious as his head hits the ceiling, and he hangs upside down from his harness.

Inter cut with...

EXT. BEACH - DAY - CONTINUOUS

The plane sits upside down on the beach with its propeller bent and buried in the sand. Waves wash up within a few feet of the wreck while WIND and RAIN continue to pound the beach.

EXT. BEACH - LATER

CLOSE ON FRONT WINDSCREEN.

Ferris regains consciousness. He reaches up and unsnaps his harness, collapsing to the ceiling of the Cessna. He struggles with the passenger side door for a moment, and then uses both feet to kick it open. He crawls out and sits down on the sand, rubbing a large bump on his head. He checks his watch. Rain and wind are quickly soaking him to the bone, but he pays little attention.

FERRIS

Two hours. I was out for two hours.  
(picks up some sand and lets  
it dribble from his hand)  
(continues)  
Too soft. Figures.

EXT. LONG - BEACH - DAY - CONTINUOUS

WE SEE a beach about a thousand feet long. Brush and cacti dominate the area above the beach. At the end of the beach is a rocky headland. High waves crash against the shore, but don't quite reach the plane. One wheel is missing from the Cessna and the propeller is bent severely and half-buried in the ground. Ferris shivers and becomes aware he is already suffering from hypothermia. He crawls back inside the wreck to escape the storm.

INT. CESSNA - CONTINUOUS

HORIZONTAL RAIN and SCREAMING WINDS pound the Cessna. Everything inside is scattered in a jumbled mess. Ferris gathers up the food and the plastic water jug and shoves them into a corner. He turns on the radio and puts on the headphones. The SOUND OF THE STORM nearly drowns out his voice.

FERRIS

Any station, this is Cessna  
November six four nine Delta  
Charlie. Can you...  
(Checks radio. It is dead.  
Tears off headphones in  
disgust.)

Inter cut with...

EXT. CESSNA - CONTINUOUS

WE SEE the antenna is snapped off, and only the base remains on the underside of the wing.

BACK TO SCENE

Ferris crawls to the rear of the plane and wraps a thin jacket around his body. Outside, the storm is reaching a crescendo with SCREAMING WINDS that ROCK THE PLANE BACK AND FORTH. He lies down and tries to get comfortable.

Inter cut with...

EXT. BEACH - NIGHT

The storm continues. It is dark. Waves crash onto the beach and wash around the plane. Ferris is sleeping.

Fade Out

EXT. BEACH - CESSNA - MORNING

Ferris crawls out of the wreck and looks up and down the beach. There are sea birds and fish strewn along the tide line, all of them dead. He walks around the plane and examines it, and then gets a shovel from the luggage compartment. He starts digging to free the propeller and perhaps turn the plane upright. He's a bit dazed. He clears the propeller, but after a few attempts to pick up the wing, he sees it's useless. He drops the shovel, sits down, and stares at the plane.

FERRIS

Well, that's it then. Guess I'm  
collecting the insurance on you.

Ferris picks up the shovel and starts walking down the beach. He looks for a good spot to start digging out a signal, and notices an abundance of shells and small rocks above the tide line. On the harder sand nearer the water, he begins digging out a big letter 'S'.

Inter cut with...

EXT. BEACH - AFTERNOON - LATER

We see Ferris collecting rocks and shells and using them to fill in the SOS letters. As he does, he glances up into the sky, searching for a rescue plane.

EXT. BEACH - AFTERNOON - LATER

Ferris is just finishing up filling in the last 'S' with a handful of shells and rocks. He steps back to admire his work.

Inter cut with...

LONG - FROM ABOVE - CONTINUOUS

The letters 'SOS' are easily seen.

BACK TO SCENE

Ferris looks up from his work as he hears the HOWL OF A COYOTE.

Inter cut with...

EXT. LONG - A RIDGE ABOVE THE BEACH - CONTINUOUS

A coyote is sitting alone on a high ridge above the beach.

BACK TO SCENE

FERRIS

(waves at the coyote)

Hey, boy! Why don't you come on down and say hello? I could use a little company right now.

Inter cut with...

EXT. LONG - RIDGE ABOVE BEACH - CONTINUOUS

The coyote turns and lopes away.

BACK TO SCENE

Ferris walks back to the plane with shovel in hand. He drops it tiredly and sits down heavily in the sand. After a moment, he crawls into the plane and retrieves the bottle of water and a banana. He takes a drink of water, puts the bottle back into the plane, and then starts walking down the beach, peeling the banana as he goes.

EXT. BEACH - DAY

Ferris sees a set of dunes about halfway down the beach and heads toward them.

EXT. BEACH - CONTINUOUS

He walks up the dunes to do a little exploring.