

Do What I Say,

by Ltjg. Paul Kesler



After more than two and a half years of flight school I was finally sitting in a jet on an aircraft carrier. My EA-6B FRS class was taking its turn as backseat riders for a carrier-qualification detachment aboard the USS *Abraham Lincoln*. As NFOs, we were excited about the opportunity to experience the essence of carrier aviation for the first time.

A couple of days before we left Whidbey Island, the FRS CQ instructor sat the five of us down to brief us on the various types of launches and recoveries, and what we could expect to see up on the flight deck. He emphasized flight-deck safety—know where to go and where not to go, keep close to the instructor, and know emergency procedures. He made one point several times: Before any airplane moved from its parking spot, all crew members would be completely strapped in, masks on, and visors down. No exceptions, period.

The first two days went well as I bagged a lot of traps. Better yet, all our new pilots were well on their way to qualifying. On the last afternoon, the LSOs were set to fly so they could make the fly-off that night. I ended up flying with two instructors from a land-based squadron

who had been sent out for refresher training because they hadn't seen the boat in more than a year. Walking up to the aircraft, I knew it was going to be a long afternoon for me in the back seat because three pilots were going to be cycled through our jet.

We taxied out of the landing area after the second trap and parked the jet in front of the island for a hot-pump and crew switch. The plan was to switch the pilots first, then take our gas. After the jet was safely chocked and chained, I safed my ejection seat and unstrapped according to SOP for hot-refueling. The first pilot said something about dinner and that he would see us for midrats, then climbed out.

As our next pilot climbed up, I realized it was our instructor from the boat-safety lesson the week before. In my only other flight with this pilot, I had been singularly impressed with his failure to communicate his intentions with other members of the crew. I thought, "This ought to be interesting."

He jumped in the jet with only about another hour of sunlight left and still one more LSO waiting in the wings to use our aircraft. The perceived pressure to get done quickly is



Not What I Do

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the only rationale I can think of for the following sequence of events.

Apparently, the pilot decided there was enough fuel for a quick run through the pattern without going below “hold-down” fuel. He decided to launch with the gas we had. However, he failed to tell the rest of the crew. Out came the chocks and chains. The crew received no warning from the pilot as we began to taxi toward cat 1.

As soon as I realized we were rolling, I set the record for attaching all six points of the ejection seat and strapping my mask to my face. What concerned me next was the vision of my pilot’s shoulder-harness straps hanging unattached at the top of his seat. The taxi to cat 1 progressed as the takeoff checks were completed and everyone finished strapping into his seat.

After the on-deck flail-ex, the flight actually went smoothly, without incident. At the end of the long flight, I climbed out of the jet and enjoyed the sunset, quite happy that it hadn’t been my last. I made it back to the ready room for an all-NFO debrief. I was dumbfounded to learn that ECMO 1 had not been

strapped in when the aircraft started to move, either. I wondered how he could have broken faith with his students so blatantly? I had listened intently to everything he had to say about CV operations and safety. I was dismayed to see him so cavalierly disregard his own lessons. The worst thing was that I never asked the pilot about what happened that afternoon. Anger initially kept me from approaching him on the subject. Eventually, one thing led to another, and I never spoke with him about it. Yes, it’s bad enough that he put us in that situation, but I should have taken the initiative of telling him about it. Although my “rookie” analysis might have fallen on deaf ears, he would have heard it, and I would not feel as if I had failed to bring an important issue to light.

We debrief our flights so the aircrew can all sit down at 1 G and zero airspeed and talk about what happened (or didn’t happen) during the flight. We never conducted a formal debrief that night, but I should have taken it upon myself to say something to him when we got home. 

Ltjg. Kesler flies with VAQ-131.