

Nugget Test Pilot

By Lt. Anthony Farrugia

Flaps, engines, flight controls, DDIs all set, and here are my external lights for the catapult shot. Wow, it's dark! Lean back into the headrest as the holdback fitting breaks, and it feels like a good catapult shot...

After spending a year in my fleet squadron, I finally had learned about midrats, tank states, and the horizontal-time luge. We were three days into our JTFEX at-sea period, finishing our busy, interdeployment-training cycle. I was scheduled to drop a laser-guided training round during a 10-plane, night-interdiction mission.

As I rotated at the end of the catapult stroke and climbed, a master-caution tone jolted me. I raised the gear and flaps, peeked at the left DDI, and saw the nosewheel-steering and flight-control-system caution lights. I had a flight-control problem, and the flaps had not retracted as commanded.

I asked departure to have my squadron rep contact me. As my rep and I troubleshot the problems, we realized the flight-control problem would prevent normal nosewheel steering after landing. We were confused, though, why the flaps had not retracted as commanded.

The rep said I would land early, with the ongoing recovery. I had plenty of fuel, and, as I later learned, this would have been a good time to start adjusting my fuel state. I was vectored overhead the ship to wait my turn. Approach sent me downwind and asked me to switch to my squadron rep to continue troubleshooting the flap and flight-control problems.

I still hadn't adjusted my fuel when approach vectored me to final bearing. I was rushed and way behind getting the aircraft ready for a night-carrier landing. I turned final and finished coordinating with the rep; we agreed on a half-flap, 33,000 pound, gross-weight landing.

Before I knew it, I was at eight miles, landing gear retracted, with paddles verifying my aircraft problems and gross weight. At six miles and dirtied up, I needed to dump 4,000 pounds and finally began adjusting my fuel state. I was more preoccupied with getting on final bearing than accomplishing checklist items. I stopped dumping fuel a mile out.

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dles helped with a strong power call. I crossed the ramp and lit the afterburners to avoid the 1-wire.

"Rats, the 1-wire," I thought, while being retracted. I saw a tow crew crossing the foul

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line toward my jet to assist with the nosewheel-steering problem. As I took a deep breath, happy to be aboard, the mini boss came on the radio.

“310, did you raise your flaps after touchdown?” He asked.

I looked down at my flap switch, and replied, “Negative sir.”

“310, your flaps are up,” he said.

A look over my shoulder confirmed the sinking feeling in my gut: I had landed no-flaps. After I exited the aircraft, I stayed on the roof, debriefing the troubleshooters. I wanted to give them as much information as possible, but I also wanted to delay my inevitable return to the ready room.

Once there, I thought about the events of that night and the lessons learned. Fortunately, no one was injured, and the aircraft wasn't damaged. Landing aboard an aircraft carrier at 176 knots is not something I would like to repeat.

I had plenty of time and gas but allowed myself to get rushed. Instead of asking for a longer vector to final or extra time to prepare for the night landing, I had tried to hack it. In my haste, I failed to accomplish those critical checklists that were written in blood—the ones meant to prevent similar occurrences.

When something doesn't feel right, it probably isn't. The higher-than-normal air-speed stared me right in the face, and a look at the FCS page would have confirmed my flap setting.

CRM is not just a boring lecture topic. A poor job of CRM caused me to rush my handling of the aircraft's problems, and I didn't accomplish critical checklists. Oops! Gotta run—the skipper just told me I have the mail-buoy watch for an important bag of mail. 🦅

Lt. Farrugia flies with VFA-37.