

A LITTLE BIT OF TENSION



Photo by PH3 Coss. Modified.

By Lt. Robert Fluck

We were sitting on the deck of USS *Kitty Hawk* (CV 63) off the coast of Japan. The weather was standard, with a broken layer at 3,000 feet. The seas were six to 12 feet, which made the boat bob like a cork. It was my fourth at-sea period, flying EA-6Bs with the Gauntlets, so I was used to the carrier environment and felt as comfortable as one can in such a place.

We looked at each other, instantly remembering that not a week earlier, the deck had launched an S-3 without receiving a salute from the pilot.

We briefed at 0515 for a morning surface-reconnaissance mission. The usual morning fatigue gripped us, but we felt good to go. Our crew had flown this mission profile each of the previous three days. The battle group was on the lookout for a surface group simulating an enemy force, and we were just one of the many assets looking for the bad guys.

We briefed all aspects of the flight, and everyone had a solid grasp of their responsibilities and the scenario. We walked on time and started our Prowler.

As part of the launch evolution, we were broken down and taxied to cat 1. I acknowledged the weight board after confirmation from my pilot, and we spread the wings. While the wings were lowering into position, the catapult director taxied us forward and engaged the holdback. After the wings were spread, locked, and the handle stowed, my pilot lowered the flaps and slats. He called the configuration over the intercom system, while I arranged my cockpit for the cat shot.

The director usually will taxi you far enough to get the tow link down in front of the shuttle, but our director had not paused us for this step. Instead, he taxied us directly in front of the shuttle. He had expedited the process and combined the two steps. Normally, this change would not have been an issue, except while he did this, the wings locked into position, and we received a master-caution light in the cockpit; we had a rudder-throw-caution light.

My pilot was calling out his integrated-position indicator, located by his left knee, and I was turning the IFF (located on the center console) from standby to on. He first saw the caution light, gave a hold sign to the taxi director, and called my attention to the indication. I told the air boss we were down on cat 1 and needed a spin-off. My pilot again was checking his configuration, so we didn't realize the director had put us into tension. Because of

the high sea state, we also didn't notice the mild shudder a plane gets when being put into tension. We weren't expecting the shudder because we didn't realize the tow link was in front of the shuttle. Obviously, we did not go to military power.

My pilot quickly realized everyone was staring at us. The hairs on his neck stood up. He posed the question, "Are we in tension?"

We looked at each other, instantly remembering that not a week earlier, the deck had launched an S-3 without receiving a salute from the pilot. As we were coming to terms with our situation, the catapult was suspended, the director stepped in front of us, and we were thankful the last link in the mishap chain was broken—preventing the Prowler community from being one step closer to a replacement airframe. One moment of inattention at the most inopportune moment can result in near-disaster. We were a head scratch away from going swimming.

How did we get so close to such a disaster? The catapult director and my pilot had failed in their agreement to always keep eyes on each other. If they had, the director would have seen the hold sign, or my pilot would have seen that the director was not looking at him when the signal was given. The pilot would have seen the tension signal, and the director would have seen my pilot was not looking at him when he gave the signal. I am also at fault for not backing up my pilot. I should have had my cockpit in order before taking the cat; then, I would have seen the tension sign, and I could have told my pilot we were being put in tension.

A flight is never routine. The regime in which we deal with is unforgiving of error. The tendency is to become comfortable with the dangers we face on a daily basis. That day, we were reminded of the dangers, and the lessons will not be forgotten. 

Lt. Fluck flies with VAQ-136.