

Overdoing It

“A man’s gotta know his limitations.”

by LCdr. Todd Abler

It was that time in the turn-around cycle, about four months since the return from the last deployment. Our squadron was going to take advantage of a carrier-qualification opportunity aboard an unfamiliar carrier to keep our pilots current. The plan looked picture perfect: we had four days in which to get three pilots, four day-traps and two night-traps. With two aircraft available, we’d be able to accomplish this in two days and nights, leaving the other two days open for running the deck. Best of all, we’d be operating from the beach, allowing for some evenings off in town during the last half of the detachment.

Things started well. We had a thorough, uneventful period of field carrier landing practice before detaching. We headed to our detachment site with two up aircraft and great weather for the transit. After arriving, we encountered a few administrative snafus, but we quickly surmounted them, and we were set to start carrier ops the next day.

The first day of quals went well. The weather was beautiful, clear with good visibility and calm seas. The night was moonless, clear and calm. Another pilot and I easily completed our day and night requirements. However, our rep aboard told us that the ship intended to work us each of the



nights we were there. This struck me as a little odd—no one in their right mind wants to bag night traps. Nonetheless, we relayed the message back to our XO on the beach.

On the second day, I went out for another day and another night period per the new plan. Our CO arrived at the beach later that day and was planning on working the third night. No one was going to work the fourth and final night.

On the third day, I went out with the CO for a day period but was able to enjoy an evening on the beach as he worked the night shift. After he got back that evening, he announced that I'd have to go out the fourth night. I could expect a single night trap and then a shot to the beach. This was, we thought, a reasonable compromise between the risk of unnecessary night traps and the benefit of helping the carrier CO train his deck crew.

The weather on the fourth day started out beautiful. We bagged six day traps and shut down on deck for dinner before the night fun. An 800-foot marine layer started to build in the afternoon, but it didn't appear threatening. As we ate dinner, we discussed how we were well on our way to centurion status, having logged 32 traps during the last four days.

The brief made it clear that the ship wanted us to work the deck that night for as long as we could. We agreed amongst ourselves to stay for two traps and then head to the beach. When we started flying again, the marine layer was a substantial overcast at 750 feet with no definite horizon underneath. With no ACLS or ILS needles, and hearing, "Descend to six hundred feet, ASR minimums," I broke out at about one mile high and lined up well right. Nevertheless, the first pass was solid. The second pass was also decent, made a

little easier by a good start resulting from a successful ACLS lock-on.

As we taxied to the catapult, we were looking forward to our shot to the beach. After reporting “Five Oh One, airborne” we got the call to take angels 1.2 and turn down wind for one more. We gave our rep a quick call to complain, but it



PHA John Sullivan

became apparent the only way to go home was to cry uncle on the radio. The conversation in the cockpit was colorful as we turned in for our third pass. The other aircraft were asked to stay and bag night traps also, so at least we weren't being singled out. We got an ACLS lock-up and started down on our pass, which turned out to be passable. We were aboard, and now we needed gas.

As we were sidelined getting our gas, the scene on the deck and the radios was almost comical. No one wanted to be the first guy to throw in the towel, but no one wanted to keep going. Pressure appeared to be coming from somewhere to keep the pattern full. As a Hornet approached, I watched a herd of what appeared to be distinguished visitors meander by my jet, and heard the following on the radio: “A little power. Power. Power!” Then a pause as the Hornet

trapped, followed by, “Nice job, Three Zero Zero. Are you up for another one?” And off he went for one more.

Someone called an S-3 and said, “OK, I need a realistic assessment of the pilot. Is he up for a couple of more?”

“Do you have a number in mind?”

By this time, we were finished fueling and started back up to go again. As we taxied to the catapult, I noticed our scheduled deck time was coming to an end. I figured we'd get one more trap and a shot to the beach. As we turned downwind, I was slaphappy after nine traps so far that day and 35 during the last four days. My focus had started to fade a little as I tried to take in the whole scene. We had no needles this time and a terrible start. We popped out of the clouds well right and high. I got it in the ballpark but over-controlled a settle in close and flattened out over the wires. I heard an “attitude” call and took off some power and set the hook. I felt myself pick up the 4-wire almost immediately and gave a big sigh as I thought, “This night is finally over.” Then I realized that I still had the power back. I jammed the throttles up, but the engines barely spooled up before I throttled back per my director's signal.

As we taxied out of the wires, I got a call from the LSOs. It wasn't the “Nice no-power-in-the-wires-for-a-cut-pass” that I expected. Instead I heard, “Five Oh One, are you up for some more?”

“I'm done,” I said, and they shot us to the beach. I thought I'd gotten away with one but was still mad at my inattention to the task at hand and thankful that I didn't get an unexpected swim call.

As it turned out, I didn't get away with anything. Big brother is always watching, even if he doesn't talk on the radio, and I'm currently the not-so-proud owner of a cut pass.

I think Clint Eastwood said it best: “A man's gotta know his limitations.” Don't expect anyone else to let you off the hook. The LSOs knew I had just pulled a boner but still left it up to me to continue or not. I think I made the right call to go home. I heard a few others jump on the bandwagon after me. Unfortunately, it was a little too late for my pride and GPA. Then again, my next pass could have been a ramp strike. 🇺🇸

LCdr. Abler flies with VAQ-131