

How Not to Do It!

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After years of living with the memories of my worst night of naval aviation, I guess it's time to write about it so someone else might learn from my experience. It was the last night of a predeployment workup prior to sailing for the Mediterranean. Our three Whales were part of a 25-airplane fly off to NAS East Coast to reduce the deck loading for a one-night, RAG, carqual period. The ship was scheduled to pull into port the next morning and sail one week later. Our early afternoon fly off was normal in all respects, and the flight lead, our skipper, was happy to learn all our aircraft were up when we got ashore. He emphasized how important it was for the planes to get back to the ship that night. Otherwise, we would have to fly to another base and be craned aboard-"Something we want to avoid at all costs."

The fly aboard was scheduled in two recoveries of 12 and 13 aircraft after the carqual evolution. We had arrived at NAS East Coast at 1500 and were scheduled for the 2100 recovery aboard USS Ship. However, we were to wait for a confirmed overhead time via Raspberry before we manned our aircraft.

I went to the BOQ [Bachelor Officers' Quarters], where I got some chow, and then to my room for a 2-hour combat nap (the smartest thing I did all day). Two hours later, my crew and I attended the three-plane Whale flight brief. Unfortunately, the brief was rather general, covering not much more than the rendezvous and breakup for individual Marshals; no in-flight emergencies were addressed. I reviewed some individual emergencies with my crew, another nugget and an AT3, and returned to the BOQ for word from the boat.

After awhile, it became obvious things weren't going as planned with the RAG carquals. Our original overhead time of 2100 came and went with us still waiting in the BOQ. Around 2300, we got the word to man the aircraft. All 25 aircraft were to return to the ship at once! By this time, we all were tired of waiting and glad to be heading for our aircraft.

Our preflight, start and taxi were normal, and I was happy to see that we were apparently ahead of everyone else, as none of the other air wing aircraft had taxied yet. Our three Whales taxied to the hold-short line with me as number three. I thought it was odd that number one and two had parked in the hold-short area in such a way as to block traffic, but the press of getting the takeoff checklist completed blotted these thoughts from my mind. With our checklists completed, the lead switched us to Tower. It was immediately obvious something was wrong with the lead's radios; both his No.1 and No.2 radios (one on Tower and one on Ground) were constantly transmitting static and cockpit conversations. The lead tried several transmissions, requesting takeoff clearance and acknowledgement of the frequency shift from the other aircraft.

Confusion began to reign supreme. NAS East Coast Tower tried calling on Guard, Tower, and Ground frequencies to tell the lead he had a stuck mike. I knew there was more to it than that, so I told my AT3 air crewman to run over and get in the lead's aircraft through the lower hatch and clarify the situation. By this time, the other air wing aircraft were lining up on the taxiway behind us. I was somewhat surprised to see the lead's air crewman running over to number two and then back into his aircraft. Suddenly, the radios were clear and I told number two that we should clear the hold-short area so everyone else could take off. He agreed, and as the dance of the Whales began in the hold-short area, I very nearly taxied off the taxiway into a big mud puddle. Finally, we were clear and waited while the rest of the aircraft took off.

As we were sitting there, I noticed someone again get out of the lead's aircraft and go over to number two. I gulped as number two, a nugget also, informed me on squadron common that the skipper wanted him to lead the flight back to the ship and that the skipper would fly on number two's wing, **NORDO!** We discussed the

wisdom of doing this and decided to send one of the navigators over to talk to the skipper to see if that's really what he wanted to do. The navigator, another nugget, returned with the word we had to get back to the ship and that's what we were going to do. So, we switched to Tower and number two transmitted, "East Coast Tower, AZ 611, flight of three for takeoff. My wingman's NORDO." After a long pause, East Coast Tower said, "Well, we can't really clear an aircraft to take off NORDO, but if he wants to, I guess it's alright with us. You're cleared for takeoff, the wind is calm."

As the new lead took the runway, I noticed the skipper was not taking the runway as number two. Thinking he must have thought better of his plan, I took the runway as number two and rolled down the runway 10 seconds after my new lead. I rendezvoused on the lead, and the two-plane flight headed towards the ship with the skipper nowhere in sight. We motored on for awhile when, suddenly, another set of aircraft lights appeared, closing fast. We soon had the skipper with us and pressed on to USS Ship.

At the ship, the carqual period was finally ending, and the recovery was marshaled to wait a push time. Number two switched our flight to Marshal, and as he did that, the skipper decided to try his radios again on Marshal frequency and the one approach frequency being used for the recovery.

Pandemonium broke loose on the radios. The ship and everyone concerned tried transmitting to the skipper that he had a stuck transmitter. The confusion forced the ship to bingo the remaining carqual birds on Guard frequency. Finally, the air wing aircraft got switched to a new Marshal frequency. Unfortunately, in the ensuing confusion, I lost radio contact with the lead. Now we had three Whales flying formation at night, none of whom had communications with one another.

Frankly, I was scared by now. I tried to transmit my situation to the ship and get an individual Marshal. I tried every frequency on the card that should have worked, and all I got was static or silence. In the midst of these radio changes, I suddenly noticed the lead was descending, and without warning, he put his speedbrakes out. I just barely avoided a midair by pulling up and to the right. As I pulled up, I was shocked to see the complete under-side of the skipper's aircraft on the left, in a 90 bank to avoid the lead. That was the end of formation flying that night. I clobbered the power and climbed as fast as I could. Finally, I was able to get through to the ship on Guard, and they switched me to a clear frequency.

The skipper, now on his own, decided to make his own approach to the ship. We had no emergency Marshal information to fall back on, so he circled the ship and, when he saw a hole develop in the pattern, descended, jumped into the night recovery pattern, and flew a night, visual approach. No one knew for sure who (or what) he was, so he was waved off on the first approach. He flew a normal NORDO bolter pattern and recovered aboard on the second pass.

By this time I was feeling better. Approach gave me individual vectors, and I flew one of the nicest three-wire passes of my life. As it happened, I landed just behind the skipper. As I got out of the aircraft, I saw the skipper walking down the deck and somehow suppressed my urge to kill. The remaining Whale was having his problems. Just after he had put out his speedbrakes for his approach, he had a utility hydraulic failure. This was complicated by the fact he was now below dirty bingo fuel requirements. He had been given instructions to tank, and had rendezvoused and tanked dirty. In the process, his flaps had bled up. He didn't notice his increased approach speed on his first approach after tanking. He floated high over the top and nearly flew into the water on a long bolter, which I witnessed as I cleared the flight deck. The ISO recommended a bingo and the ship directed the same, even though he was 1000 pounds below dirty bingo fuel requirements. Fortunately, he flew a good profile, received good handling by Approach Control, and landed with 10 minutes of fuel remaining.

Well, that was it. As I look back at all the mistakes we made, it's a wonder we weren't all killed in one big midair. All of us had the opportunity, but refused to break the chain of errors that precedes most accidents. Get-home-itis (our

floating home, that is), inexperience, and complacency all reared their ugly heads. I only hope that this article has given you a good example of how not to do it, and that you won't let yourself be led down the garden path by an overzealous skipper, as I did.