Tweener Weather

By Lt. Andrew Gastrell

"Nose down, idle…."

I never before had said that while two miles aft of the carrier on a night Case III recovery. However, one bizarre night, I said these words to the level-3 pilot (3P) while he tried to complete his initial carrier qualification and renewal of his carrier-landing currency. In retrospect, I should have known something was amiss as my squadron's three NP2000 Hawkeyes, along with two S-3B Vikings, launched off the front end of USS *George Washington* (CVN-73).

During preflight planning for the CQ evolution, the weather brief had described a line of thunderstorms that would approach later in the night, bringing increased winds with them. Our ceilings and visibility wouldn't be a problem, and the system would blow through before the next morning's flight ops. I thought, "Not great, but good enough to go flying." After all, we only needed four traps.

After the brief, LCdr. Weather Worry-Wort complained about going flying in less than ideal weather. LCdr. Salty Mustache, an S-3B transition NFO, scheduled to fly in my aircraft that night, said his fears were just another example of what happens when a reduced op tempo limits an aviator's exposure to weather.

Man-up and launch on the dark-and-windy flight deck went off without a hitch. We launched and went straight to marshal for some ironically titled "comfort time." After 20 minutes, we commenced our approach. As we got lower, we felt increased turbulence buffeting the aircraft. At 1,200 feet, we were in the middle of very violent turbulence.

At 14 miles, I asked Salty how he was feeling, chiding him with, "And you said we were scared to fly in any kind of weather."

Little did I know what was about to happen. The two S-3s ahead of us told the ship they were experiencing severe turbulence, and, in turn, each one was waved off by the landing-signal officers.

We had good bull's-eye azimuth information and acquired our automatic-carrier-landing-system (ACLS) needles on cue at six miles. As we bounced around like we were off-roading in a Pinto, the nervous 3P did a good job fighting the aircraft through the rough environment.

While flying the ball during field-carrier-landing practice (FCLP), the young pilot at the controls had a known tendency to add unnecessary power and consequently become substantially overpowered. We had briefed this trend, and, as aircraft commander, I was ready to quickly address it should he slip into his old ways. At two miles, when we should have been at 800-feet AGL, we rapidly rose to 2,000-feet AGL. This

quick altitude change took me by surprise.

"Easy with it," I said, as I watched the altimeter climb and our ACLS glideslope needle fall. "Wow, I've never seen him add this much power," I thought.

"Easy with it," I said again.

I felt no extraneous G-forces on the aircraft because of the turbulence, so my ever-important, seat-of-the-pants feeling disagreed with what my eyes saw on the instruments. Momentarily confused, I trusted my flight-school training and relied on the instruments.

This isn't right. Then I said, "Nose down, idle."

The junior pilot pulled back the power levers and pushed over the nose to a completely uncomfortable attitude looking down at the back of the ship. We were 1,200 feet higher than we wanted to be. As our rate of descent increased with our airspeed, we gradually approached the correct profile for the approach.

"601, three-quarter mile, on course, above glidepath, call the ball," said the final controller.

Just as we received that transmission, we saw the ball on the very top of the lens.

"601, Hawkeye ball, 5.0."

At idle the entire way until just over the ramp, our hook caught the 4-wire, and we came to a stop. Effectively, we just had executed a precautionary-emergency landing to a carrier arrestment.

"Nice job. Three more to go," I said.

Without a second thought, the flight deck taxied us to cat 1, and we quickly launched into the blackness.

The two E-2s behind us waved off because of winds and weather. Airborne again, one of the Vikings called, "700 is seeing 60-knot airspeed fluctuations and is experiencing severe turbulence on base leg."

I looked down at my instrument panel, saw my airspeed indicator waving like a stereo needle, and then echoed, "601, also experiencing severe turbulence and 70-knot airspeed flux."

The ship trapped all the aircraft and kept us on deck for more than an hour as they steamed away from the bad weather that rapidly enveloped the carrier's working area. The ship eventually found clear air, and we completed our CQ requirement.

After shutting down for the night and putting our gear into the paraloft, I spoke with our squadron safety officer, who happened to be in CATCC as our representative that night. While he was in CATCC, one of the controllers came up to him during our first pass and whispered in a quiet, worried tone, "Uh, sir, we just saw… 601; they just climbed 1,500 feet in a few seconds."

As it turned out, two squall lines had converged on the carrier. Their microbursts had wreaked havoc on our approaches that night.

What we ran into was a "tweener" weather situation on our preflight and initial phases of the mission—while we had a carrier-operations mindset. The weather brief hadn't given us any reason to abort the hop, and we definitely communicated the weather to CATCC while we were flying.

It didn't occur to us to stop the evolution as we taxied to the catapult after our first trap. Perhaps we were in a can-do mindset because we were executing CQ, and our habit pattern drives us to continue, even when we've exceeded our comfort level. CATCC could have called earlier for a pause, but they might not have been able to clearly discern the extent of the hazard to flight operations.

When extraordinary circumstances occur, it is better to forcefully voice them with a squadron rep or directly with tower personnel. Make a recommendation to stop before taking the catapult stroke. The next time Mother Nature exerts her authority, the outcome may be different.

Lt. Gastrell flies with VAW-121.

Photo by PH3 Christopher Stephens. Modified.