

# Welcome to the Real World

by Lt. Peter Ries

I was flying a T-45, my second hop on a Key West det. After some excellent air-to-air training, my instructor decided to do one last engagement out in the area. When we checked our fuel, he had more gas than I did, and I had about 370 pounds. Our squadron SOP said “on deck with 350 pounds or a low-fuel light,” which came on around 350 pounds.

We entered the initial for runway 07 at Boca Chica Field. Tower had cleared us to the initial many miles back, and I was feeling confident in my knowledge of the course rules. We had flown around the southern end of the island from the west to avoid the busy terminal area of Key West International.

I reported the initial to tower. They replied, “Enter the initial to runway thirty-one”.

“Whoa,” I thought. “I must have made a mistake, but I could swear that I had been cleared for runway seven.” My helmet promptly caught fire. I confirmed that tower wanted us to use runway 31, even though we were at the initial for runway 7. I started a right turn. My lead, who was on the right side, took the lead. The situation was now out of my hands; lead could deal with it. I would just nuzzle back into cruise and follow him. We found out later that they had originally cleared us to runway 7 but had changed the runway without telling us. But it didn’t matter—I was flying wing now.

We reported the initial for runway 31 and turned early, directly toward the field. My lead must have felt low on gas, too, a good sign. I crossed under to the right, ready for a left break. My lead was a gung-ho Marine Harrier pilot and liked to enter the break as fast as possible. We were moving! The last speed I saw in the HUD was 425. Then, to make things interesting and re-ignite my helmet fire, tower told us they required a right break from us. We were seconds from the numbers. I saw a quick cross-under signal from the lead and proceeded to cross under. They also told us about a single F-14 that was orbiting the field at 1,200 feet. We had tallied one five miles earlier and had wondered what that aircraft was doing.

Seconds later, lead broke right, and I followed. I now had a low-fuel light and told my lead. He said, "No problem, we'll be on deck in a minute." We flew a normal right-hand pattern (as normal as a right-hand pattern can be flown). At the 90, my lead was waved off for wake turbulence from a C-141 doing a touch-and-go on runway 7. No wonder they didn't want us to land on that runway. I was waved off also.

Then a section of Hornets entered the break for our runway, so we were extended upwind slightly until the second Hornet broke. We followed immediately. I relayed my fuel state to my lead and recommended that he request special handling, so we could get on deck as soon as possible. He told tower that we were minimum fuel and had to land this pass. Tower acknowledged the call. Again, at the 90, my lead was waved off, for no obvious reason. He took it around to the right, without much more than saying his call sign. I was definitely emergency fuel by this time and was determined to land this pass. As you can probably guess, I got waved off.

I told tower that I had emergency fuel and had to land. They told me to take it around for a foul deck. I couldn't believe this was happening to me. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw a white van drive across the approach end of the runway. I took it around the right side and saw my lead turning right in front of me.

I was told to extend when four T-45s entered the break at 800 feet, between me and the F-14, which was still orbiting around at 1,200 feet. Why were all these airplanes converging in the same piece of sky with such minimal separation? It all seemed so unnecessary. I had now lost all faith in the tower's ability to get me on deck safely. After all, I had just come from NAS Kingsville, where the tower takes really good care of you. They were used to dealing with inexperienced aviators, and as a result, I had been shielded from the realities of aviation. Welcome to the real world.

The four Goshawks seemed to drive upwind forever before they started breaking. As the last one broke, I thought, "I'll bet that guy isn't even in the tower's airspace." I turned into him before he was even abeam. I was going to get on deck. I had about 150 pounds of gas. My lead landed, followed by the division, landing one by one until it was my turn. I had gone way long in the groove, just to make sure that the tower didn't wave me off for interval. On deck, I rolled out and taxied back to the det hangar. I had 80 pounds of fuel.

I learned two big lessons that day. First, never assume that just because you are in the landing pattern, you can drop your pack. Emergencies can happen anytime. In my case, I allowed myself to slowly become an emergency by letting the situation get out of hand. Second, the common practice of heading back to the field with the minimum amount of gas may not be that smart. 🛩️

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