

So Much for My Good Deal

By Lt. David Riley

It was my third flight after receiving an upgrade to E-2C aircraft commander, and I started the day with a rare single-cycle mission. We were controlling a unit-level training, self-escort strike. I was in the left seat, and the recovery was expected to be Case I. Life couldn't get much better.

To be honest, my mind dwelled more on the five-hour, night-OEF mission I had waiting for me upon return, rather than the mission at hand. My brain instantly was recaged during the catapult when my aircraft had a bearing failure in the port generator.

In the past, a bearing failure wasn't a significant problem. The generators have a secondary-bearing design that allows the crew to complete their mission before the generator requires maintenance or fails. However, recent bearing problems often had led to catastrophic generator failures and subsequent engine failures. The pucker factor went up a bit, and we decided the prudent course of action was to bring home the airplane at the first opportunity.

Instead of proceeding on our mission, we entered the overhead stack at 5,000 feet, standard E-2C low holding. We tried to talk the air boss into letting us land after the launch

was complete. Because it was the first launch of the day, the aircraft spotted on the deck nullified this option, unless the ship did an emergency pull forward.

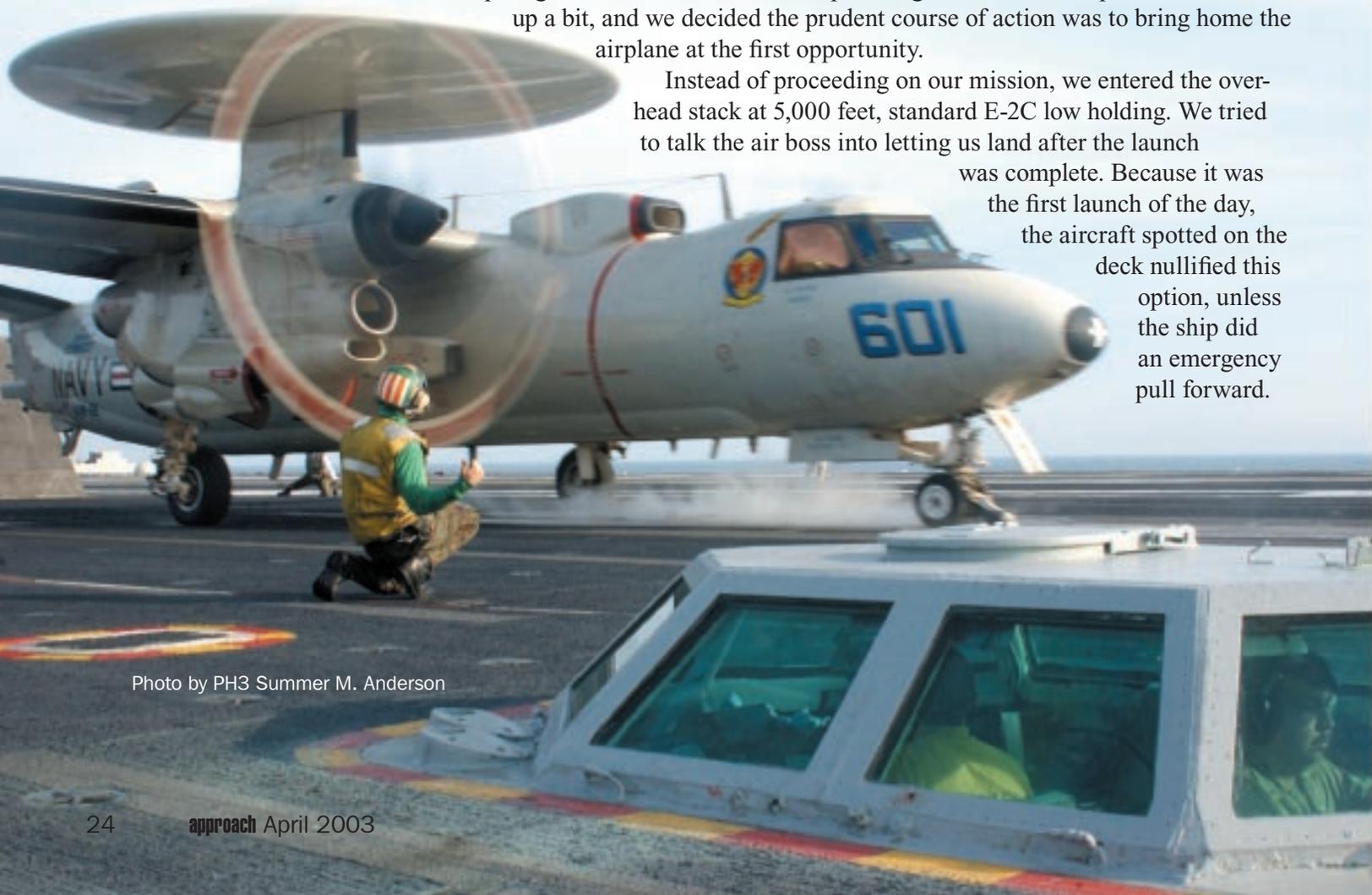


Photo by PH3 Summer M. Anderson

After talking to the skipper over the radio, we adjusted our plan to land first during the scheduled recovery, an hour and a half later.

Fortunately, the generator held. We entered the break rather gingerly—not wanting to press our luck—and rolled into the groove, with everything looking good.

Right at the in-close position, I felt a little settle—it had to be the burble—so I added a little power. Subconsciously, I thought I heard a pop, and the airplane just didn't feel right. More importantly, the power addition didn't stop my little settle. The controlling LSO came over the radio with a power call, and all I heard were the voices from the peanut gallery on the platform screaming for me to wave off. The power hit the firewall as the controlling LSO echoed the peanut gallery's opinion, and the happy lights flashed in my eyes. Round and round we go.

As I leveled off at 100 feet and started climbing away, something still didn't feel right. Normally, the Hawkeye has an amazing climb rate down low. Today, it just wasn't impressive. I wondered if the high heat was the cause, as I scanned my engine instruments. The port engine was putting out only half its usual horsepower. I leveled off at 600 feet before pointing out this problem to the copilot. We watched as the horsepower started dwindling, and the turbine temperature started going through the roof. Our situation was not looking good.

Paddles was kind enough to tell us our port motor had produced a large volume of black smoke before he decided to give us another trip around the pattern. Well, there goes at least a little weight off my shoulders—I wouldn't be getting a waveoff on the greenie board. However, I still had a sick motor to deal with.

I was at 600 feet, dirty and turning to downwind. I had to bring the left power lever back to idle to keep the motor within temperature limits. Because I didn't want to start a fire, that's where the lever remained with one problem: The propeller was windmilling, and my energy state was deteriorating as quickly as the engine was. Max power on the one good engine and 120 knots also meant I quickly was running out of rudder. I knew my right leg soon would get tired. It was time to take care of this problem: We needed to shut down that motor.

Concerned about my controllability and energy state, I quickly said the first two steps of the engine shutdown (no fire) procedure before I announced my intention to the crew. We weren't all on the same page. I had been so busy fighting the airplane to keep it airborne I had forgotten to mention to the crew I was running out of rudder, and my max airspeed only was 120 knots. When I finally told the crew, we agreed on my course of action: Shut down the engine, turn to final at two miles, and take a straight-in. I was so busy concentrating on putting the airplane dead on centerline, without any unreasonable glideslope deviations, that my copilot had to remind me to throttle back when the 2-wire brought us to a halt.

Thus ended my first, single-engine, E-2, carrier-arrested landing, and, as could be expected, the learning points were many. While I was worried about the controllability of my aircraft and its energy state, I had forgotten the easy solution to the problem. Because I already had added all the power that was safely available, I should have raised my gear. It would have given us ample controllability and time to discuss the situation in a much more relaxed atmosphere. I had overlooked a simple solution and it could have led to disaster.

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While I was fighting with my airplane, I forgot about the crew inside. Sure, the old axiom recommends aviating first, navigating second, and communicating third. However, in the E-2C and other crew-oriented aircraft, internal communications are as important as the monkey skills. In this case, effective communication with my crew would have had us all on the same page and would have cut the sweating time in half. I can't wait until the next time to see if the lessons take. Well, then again... 

Lt. Riley flies with VAW-121.