

Broken Nosegear in the Prowl



Photo by PH2 Grasso
Modified

By Maj. Clyde Beattie, USAF

A good deal occasionally drops into your lap. Our squadron was to be the recipient of a live shoot of a high-speed anti-radiation missile (HARM). As much as I loved Whidbey Island, Wash., after moving there from Cannon Air Force Base, N.M., seeing California sunshine—instead of continuous spring rains—and shooting a live HARM was a good deal worth fighting over.

After some good-natured discussions, my crew won the shoot. Reek, Shimon, Ratbert, and I packed our gear in the ol' family Griswold and headed south. The evening entertainment in Los Angeles was great.

It was a beautiful day with great flight conditions, and we were all pumped about the shoot. Our NATOPS

brief, which included many “what ifs,” focused mainly on HARM-launch contingencies. After the brief, we walked to our mighty steed.

After a normal start and taxi, we had a generator malfunction that threatened to give our wingman the launch. [*Wingman fangs grow 10 inches and start to drip saliva at this point.—Ed.*] Our wingman launched with the spare, and we prayed for a miracle. Fortunately, our maintainers scrambled to fix us and, after 30 minutes, gave us an “up” jet.

We blasted off to intercept our trusty wingman and took our rightful place in the lead. After carrier qualifications, launching a HARM from low altitude was the highlight of my time with the Navy. All the hard work and coordination paid off when that missile thundered off the rail like a freight train and flew straight and



true to the target. We rejoiced in the cockpit after the successful launch and completed our post-launch-and-recovery checks.

Our return to Point Mugu, Calif., was uneventful. After a “sierra hotel” fan-break, I lowered the landing-gear handle and checked the duty for traffic. About six to nine seconds later, I saw the red light still was on in the gear handle, and only the two main gear indicated down and locked. The nosegear showed unsafe, with no indications of getting any better.

I broke out of the pattern and asked my wingman to check me. We left everything where it was until he came alongside and told us the mains looked OK, but the nosegear appeared to be in an intermediate position and sort of “flopping” back and forth—not very comforting.

We stayed below 250 knots, broke out the checklist, and went through all the steps. We recycled the gear, then alternately tried to load and unload the aircraft. Next, we yawed the jet left and right, to no avail. We maximized crew-resource management by discussing other options and previous experiences.

Discussions continued with the tower and our ground personnel. We located an LSO, worked up a game plan, and discussed the situation with everyone. Fuel was not yet a factor, since we still had 30 minutes’

worth. We cleared our wingman to land first, in case we closed the runway, airfield or countryside. We discussed doing a touch-and-go to bounce the gear into the down-and-locked position. The LSO felt this idea might not be good because the nose might come down and scrape the runway if the hook missed the wire.

We decided to touch down in front of the approach-end arresting gear, with the hook lowered. After rigging the short-field cable, the first pass ended with a hook skip or bolter. This gave the LSO a chance to see the gear up close. He reported the nosegear appeared to be hanging loose and swinging in the breeze like a broken arm—not good. “Man, is the skipper gonna be mad if I break his jet in California!” I thought.

I flew a slightly flatter approach on the next pass and touched down on-speed, about 100 feet before the wire. I was prepared to shut down the engine to prevent foreign-object damage if the nosegear didn’t hold and

we became a high-speed runway scraper. I also thought about the go-around if the cable or hook failed. I held the nose off in a traditional Air Force “aero brake” attitude I had tried to teach my Navy brethren. I caught the wire, and the deceleration threw the nosegear forward and locked it before the nose came down. After we rolled back, the ground crew pinned the gear, and we taxied clear.

Postflight inspection revealed all actuators attached to the nose-landing gear had sheared at their attachment points sometime during the flight or initial gear extension. The nose-landing-gear extension, retraction, and over-center lock actuators still were attached but only at one end. No amount of recycling would have locked the gear down.

After another warm California night, we were told to “stiff leg” the aircraft home. That morning, we pinned the nosegear in the down-and-locked position, with the option of raising the mains if we lost an engine. This precaution added time to the return trip, but, hey, flight time is flight time.

The first lesson we learned was to work on crosstalk between the squadrons and from higher command. This problem had occurred several months earlier to another EA-6B, but our squadron never had been briefed on it. Second, use the ORM you receive in training. What seems like a good idea to you might not seem so hot to someone not at the controls. Last, the flight’s not over until the bird is tied down and you are heading in for a slider and some auto-dog. Keep some fuel as a pad in case the unexpected happens. The Prowler continues to age until the EAF-18E/F/G come online, so we need to stay abreast of current and potential problems that may come up within the fleet. Keep making suggestions to keep ‘em flying. 

Maj. Beattie flew the EA-6B with VAQ-133, and now flies the F-117 with the 9th FS, Holloman Air Force Base, N.M.

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