

13,500 Feet of Runway and Nowhere to Go

By Ltjg. Michael Stokes

It was an early Tuesday morning. I just had left the RAG a few weeks earlier, and now I was a new fleet aviator.

I couldn't believe my good fortune: After only a couple weeks in the squadron, I was going to Fallon to drop two live Mk-84s and shoot the 20 mm cannon. The brief and preflight were uneventful. As we took the runway on a beautiful Lemoore morning, it hit me—I felt a little sick to my stomach. Was I just nervous, or was it, perhaps, mad-cow disease? I told lead on the auxiliary frequency how I felt, thinking we could press and let my condition settle out in the air. About 40 miles north of the field, my stomach pains wouldn't go away. Somewhere in the back of my head I remembered my skipper's check-in advice, "If it doesn't feel right, just start thinking how the mishap report would read if something were to happen."

"I'm not feeling too well," I radioed, feeling it was the right thing to say, especially with 4,000 pounds of TNT and a nose full of bullets.

Lead asked, "How bad?"

I replied, "I think we should turn around." Enough said about the state of my stomach.

So, we did a 180 and went back to the field as quickly as we could. I was breaking out in a cold sweat and shaking and knew it was bad, but I tried to keep the task at hand above all else: landing the jet. I checked the gross weight of the jet. Since we barely had used any of our gas, still had two 2,000-pound bombs on our pylons, and weighed 37,000 pounds, we were 4,000 pounds heavier than the landing gear could take for a normal 3.5-degree landing. I knew it would be necessary to flare. We asked for a downwind

entry, but I didn't recognize we were so close to the field, and I didn't take enough separation. We had to depart and re-enter—the number one sign I wasn't 100 percent physically or mentally "in the game."

My lead asked if I knew what I was doing. I assured him I did. We came in for the not-so-hot, 0.3-mile, in-trail break. I did all the landing checks and noticed my approach speed was 148 knots, faster than I was used to. I verified it to be correct and flew a slightly high ball and flared to land.

Here's where the situation caught up with me. On touchdown, I brought back the power and executed a couple of bad techniques, the same ones I had been using for flying the Hornet the last seven months. First, I pushed the stick forward, getting the nosewheel on the ground for steering authority—a bad technique.

Second, I got on the brakes early because of the higher landing speed. Unlike Hornets I

had flown previously, this one didn't want to slow down. I extended the speed brake to increase the drag and to slow. At 100 knots, with my feet firmly on the brakes, I pulled the stick toward my lap to get the huge stabilators into the wind to create more drag. I saw lead's plane getting bigger in the wind-screen and finally passed him at the

two board. I elected not to take a long-field arrestment, fearing the cable might recenter my jet, sending it into his.

"Watch your brakes, you're smoking them!" I heard over the radio, as I did my runway lead change.

I was driving the brake pedals through the firewall, fearing the inevitable—I was going off the end of the 13,500-foot runway. I tried to use the nosewheel steering to ground loop the jet on the runway, but I felt the Hornet was leaning too much, so I shut down both engines and traveled 10 feet into the grassy dirt.

I heard a call to tower, "You better send the fire trucks; there's a fire under his jet."

As if I wasn't scared already, that call spiced it up a notch. I safed the seat, unstrapped, turned off the battery, and jumped down. As I ran from the jet, squadron AOs were the first on scene with a fire extinguisher. Our brave AO1 put out the grass fire, and the base firemen put out the brake fire. I quickly was driven to the squadron and started recollecting everything that had happened. The lessons learned were many.

* As all Hornet pilots know, the jet records everything. Postflight ECAMS made it all clear. I thought I had brought back the throttles, but it turns out they still were around 85 percent for the first 10 seconds on deck. I also used excessive brake force too early on post-touchdown, along with pushing full forward on the stick. When I needed the brakes, it was too late.

* Since I was new to the squadron, and because dropping live bombs and shooting the gun was such a good deal, I was too eager to complete the mission. I should have recognized I was not feeling well, taxied back, and let my lead have his good deal.

* I successfully had stopped the Hornet many times, using poor landing techniques. I definitely was wrong to push the stick forward, which actually flattens the stabilators. I also was wrong to apply the brakes so early.

* Compartmentalization is the key to this business. Although I physically and mentally was out of the game, the only way to solve my problem was to unstrap while I still was safe in the chocks.

We learn something new everyday in our aircraft, and we increase our knowledge with experience and communication with fellow aviators. Ask questions, and share your experiences—good and bad—and everyone benefits. 

Ltjg. Stokes flies with VFA-94.