

A LITTLE TOO Relaxed

By Lt. Joseph Bayer

Midcruise doldrums were in effect, and I was a little too relaxed on the KC-135 tanker. “Lopez 21 port observation, nose is cold, switches safe, Buno xxxxxx looking for 6K.”

It still was daytime, calm, and the weather was clear. As I flew to close in for the plug, the basket moved ever so slightly to the left. I remember thinking, “I can make it in.” The probe of my FA-18A lipped on the outer one-third of the basket, the entire basket folded back, and pranged against the side of my nose cone. After backing out and uttering a few expletives, I plugged again. “Lopez 22, I’ll need an airspeed check on our way home.”

After tanking, we headed home to mother with a rapidly setting sun behind us. The airspeed check had my AOA showing three degrees less than my wingman’s AOA, with accurate airspeed indications, and I had no cautions. My starboard AOA probe was

attached, with no visible signs of damage. Unlike the FA-18C, I was unable to deselect one of my AOA probes. If one of them wasn’t working, the whole system was inaccurate. We headed home at a slower-than-normal airspeed because I was worried about something coming off the side and going down the starboard intake.

By the time we checked in with strike and asked for a rep, it was hazy and dark as hell.

It was time for the dirty airspeed check. As my gear came down, I immediately had other issues. My AOA bracket and approach lights showed a “fast” indication—that was expected. What I didn’t expect was the INS VEL caution light and a cycling VSI ranging from minus 800 to plus 800 fpm. I held level the velocity vector on the horizon bar and watched the radar altimeter tick down steadily in altitude.

A Hornet pilot’s fear was upon me. I would have



to do a night-standby pass at the boat with dangerously inaccurate AOA indications, a standby VSI, and no auto throttles—not a fun situation. I’d rather do a single-engine approach. I was loaded with ordnance and had two chances to get aboard before needing a tanker.

I briefed paddles and asked marshal to give me a longer straightaway, so I could adjust my scan and cage my brain for the approach.

Coming down the chute, I floundered with the new scan. I fought the urge to center the AOA bracket, which would have made me dangerously slow, and flying standby did not feel comfortable. By the grace of God, I got to a decent start.

“303 Hornet, ball, no AOA, stand by.”

As my scan shifted to the ball, I again unconsciously started to center the E-bracket, and the jet began to flare like a cobra: not good. I was slow and low.

“Power.” I clobbered on power, flattened out, skipped the 1-wire, and caught the 2-wire. I was aboard in an ugly manner, but it never felt so good to feel my aircraft come to an abrupt halt.

Complacency on the tanker was my first mistake. I had been doing in-flight refueling every day for the last three months, and I had no fear of the iron maiden. That contraption really can do some damage if you’re not careful.

Going back even further, I wish I had practiced more standby approaches during work-ups on the beach, at the field, and in the simulator. The HUD, velocity vector, and auto throttles can be a crutch. You still need to get aboard without them.

I was fortunate on this pass. A timely call from paddles kept me from hitting the back of the ship. Learn from my mistake. 

Lt. Bayer flies with VFA-97.