

What's That Noise?

By Cdr. Karl Thomas

We had manned-up for yet another Operation Iraqi Freedom mission, and the ORM buzzword of the day was complacency. We had been in theater for more than three months and hadn't missed a sortie yet. Our coveted 100-percent sortie-completion rate was put in jeopardy every time I briefed ORM and said, "We won't take the plane if it isn't absolutely safe. We've got command and control backups on the ground."

Coordination reporting centers (CRCs) on the ground in Iraq would provide command and control 24 hours a day if we couldn't get airborne for any safety-of-flight reason. The air wing hadn't dropped a bomb in the past two months because the hot spots on the ground were too sporadic, ill-defined, or isolated for close-air support. Besides, we were in a nation-rebuilding mode. The mission still was important, and the air wing was flying overhead in case the situation escalated or a valuable target was identified. We definitely were trained and ready to answer the call to

Photo by PH3 Elizabeth Thompson



support ground forces facing an increasingly testy and annoying enemy.

The brief and preflight for our evening flight went well. After engine start, the three NFOs in the back were busy entering waypoints, punching buttons, conducting system tests, and getting radio checks to make sure we had a full "up" aircraft.

I almost missed it: I heard a noise as the pilots were wiping out the controls. The sound completely was unfamiliar and something I never before had heard. The two junior aircrew on either side of me didn't hear it—not until I told the pilots to repeat whatever they just did and drew the aircrew's attention to the noise. It was a weird, feint whine but noticeable. The pilots at the opposite end of the aircraft couldn't hear it.

As the first to launch, we were running out of time to close the main-entrance hatch—the yellowshirts wanted us to taxi early to the cat. After several control wipeouts, and with an airframe technician looking at me with a quizzical look, I wanted an additional opinion about the noise. I had the carrier-aircraft-plane commander (CAPC) come back into the Hummer tube for a listen. He also heard it, and we decided this plane wasn't going flying tonight.

We had a backup plane and launched as the last plane off the deck. Our 100-percent sortie-completion rate still was intact. The whining noise was fluid leaking past the hydraulic-isolation valve of the elevators. The maintainers changed the valve that night, and the aircraft reentered the lineup.

I was scheduled for the same sortie the following night, with the same CAPC. As we conducted our preflights, the aircraft-control officer checked the aft-equipment compartment and saw a small puddle of hydraulic fluid. It wasn't much but enough to pool below the hydraulic filters that normally are dry. Spotting the fluid was a good catch.

In the center compartment of the E-2, where the aircrew sit, floorboards prevent looking below and into the bilge. We called in a troubleshooter to pull the floorboard next to where the fluid was found—another good decision. A considerable amount of fluid



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Photo by PH3 Yesenia Rosas

was present, and our crew decided the plane wasn't going flying.

Unfortunately, a backup aircraft wasn't available this time, and our sortie-completion rate was in severe jeopardy. The airframers did a quick cleanup, and we left the CAPC behind to turn the engine and check for a static leak or bigger problem. The maintainers determined the fluid was static and was left over from the previous night's fix.

With time running out, we manned-up to make the launch. As we started the aircraft and wiped out the controls, I heard a different noise: a swoosh sound. Two nights in a row, I had heard two noises that didn't sound right. The same airframer from the night before came in, and the two of us looked at each other with disbelief. This time, however, his expression wasn't as confused. He headed directly for the hellhole to purge air from the hydraulic system. The noise went away, and we were in business. In the meantime, a little more fluid began to seep and pool. Knowing there were small holes between the frames underneath the floorboards, we called in the airframers to make the call. They said the fluid was only residual, and we took the plane.

After we shot down the catapult, we saw a sheen of hydraulic fluid covering the pressure bulkhead in the back of the aircraft. The ACO went to the aft-equipment compartment, and, to our shock, there was a

large quantity of fluid. We quickly marked our hydraulic reservoirs and monitored them throughout the flight. Apparently, the fluid that was cleaned up underneath the aircraft-control officer's (ACO's) seat wasn't all the fluid from the previous day's maintenance. Fluid also was found beneath the NFO's compartment.

As we took the cat shot, the fluid found its way to the back of the aircraft. After landing, the fluid disappeared back into its hiding spot. After a thorough postflight inspection, no additional leaks were found. What we had was excess fluid that had found its way outside the direct area of maintenance.

What did we take away from this experience? Use all your senses—if something doesn't sound right, it probably isn't. Have the confidence and willingness to stop and get a second opinion. For our maintainers, when cleaning up from a job, follow the 36-inch rule, and clean up beyond the direct repair. When it comes to fluid, look further. A more thorough cleanup of this job would have found the excess fluid.

Finally, have a go or no-go plan. When do you make the sortie, and when do you call it quits? I initially felt I had made the wrong call after we had launched the second night and hydraulic fluid had reappeared. A 100-percent sortie-completion rate means nothing if not completed with 100-percent safety. 🇺🇸

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