

You Smell That?

By Ltjg. Mike Ferrara

The squadron had been aboard USS *George Washington* (CVN-73) for almost a month, and we were near the end of my first set of work-ups. We were scheduled for a “pinky launch” on a standard S-3B recovery-tanker mission but with the added excitement of a trip to the KC-135. I only had been to the “Iron Maiden” once, so I was apprehensive. My COTAC and I did a thorough brief.

As we completed our after-takeoff checks, smoke now was visible around the center console and was blowing around the cockpit.

Off the catapult, I raised the landing gear and kept climbing. As the flaps came up, and, as we passed 1,000 feet, we knew something wasn't right. I continued to climb straight ahead, took a good look at my instruments, and asked, "You smell that?"

"Yeah, get your mask on," my rightseater replied.

The jet flew fine, with no fire lights or caution lights on the panel. The engine instruments were normal, as were the oil and hydraulic pressures. Immediately, my mind started to imagine the terrible things that could be occurring somewhere out of sight, deep in the bowels of our aged jet. The fumes made my eyes water—definitely acrid and not good. Something that should not have been burning was trying to ruin our day.

As we completed our after-takeoff checks, smoke now was visible around the center console and was blowing around the cockpit. I quickly executed the boldface of the smoke-and-fumes emergency procedure, as my COTAC backed me up. Based on recent S-3B mishaps, it occurred to us that something might have been amiss in the electronic-control-system (ECS) compartment.

As we passed 2,500 feet, we told departure of our problem and asked to speak with our CATCC rep. We returned overhead to continue troubleshooting.

The rep started working to get us recovered—ASAP. In the meantime, the offgoing

tanker rendezvoused overhead the ship with us to check for trailing smoke. After a brief discussion over tac frequency, the other crew said we looked OK.

"What is this?" my COTAC shouted as he looked down.

Molten plastic had dripped from the overhead-eyebrow panel onto his leg. Good thing he was wearing his gloves because his first reaction was to touch the hot plastic to figure out what it was. We were amused for a few seconds, but then we refocused and decided to turn off all the rheostats that provide backlighting to that panel. The sporadic puffs of smoke obviously were coming from behind the eyebrow panel. The smoke seemed to subside, but we remained on oxygen because the odor remained.

Soon we were vectored to downwind, and it was time to think about the approach. We checked and triple-checked everything. The approach and landing were uneventful.

Our maintainers determined recent rain, combined with chafed insulation on the wiring behind the formation-lights rheostat, had created a short circuit. The jet reeked of smoke for almost two weeks after the incident but went flying the next morning. Although the incident turned out OK, it could have been worse if we had not reacted as crew. Thanks to good procedures and proper PPE, no one was hurt. 

Ltjg. Ferrara flies with VS-31.