



Learning

the Hard Way

By Lt. Melony Lynch

A couple of weeks before an Operation Southern Watch mission, a CAG staff pilot stopped by our ready room to discuss an incident he had regarding bad AOA information and incorrect on-speed indications. The incident occurred during his carrier approach and was caused by a basket slap. I listened intently and thought I would throw his lessons learned

into my Hornet bag of tricks. Unfortunately, I repeated the same mistakes he had made.

I was wingman for a night HVAAP mission in support of a strike into Iraq. My loadout of two sidewinders, one HARM, and one AMRAAM would not allow me to come aboard with much more fuel than our required tank state of 3,500 pounds—to be at max trap on the ball. According to my calculations, I would have 800 pounds over tank state on the ball. Shortly after my launch, I lost my primary fuel and engine-instrument displays. I was able to get the needed information, though, by referencing the correct DDI display.

Our mission ultimately was cancelled, so I returned to the marshal stack for the night recovery.

While holding in marshal, I realized I would have to dump fuel to be at max trap for landing. However, I couldn't get the dump switch to stay on. Since the primary fuel display was inoperative, and my fuel state was below the bingo setting I had set before the failure, the system would not dump. I was under a minute away from pushing on time. I elected to push and contacted my CATCC representative for assistance when level at 1,200 feet. Once level, I forcefully could hold the switch on and dump fuel. I continued to dump as I approached tip-over and finally reached an acceptable fuel state to trap.

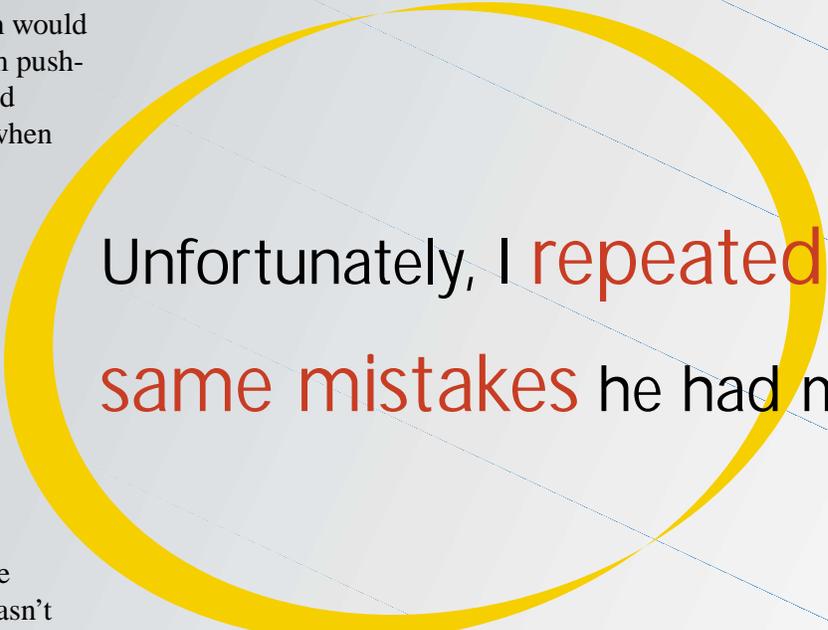
When I called the ball, paddles didn't respond. I again called the ball but still got no response. Now what? Am I NORDO? Then, I got cut lights. Does that mean roger ball or add power? I added power and had my first bolter for the night. Because of my low fuel state, the air boss sent me to the tanker. At least I wasn't NORDO. I got gas and made another approach. This time, I got a foul-deck waveoff. Ugghhh! Back to the tanker once again.

Frustrated and wanting to be on deck. I rendezvoused on the tanker and made a quick stab at the basket. In my haste, I caught the outer edge with the refueling probe and sent the basket rolling around the right side of the aircraft's nose. I backed away

and made another stab. On this attempt, I got in and uttered those embarrassing words, "Three one two is plugged and receiving." After getting gas for the second time that night, I was ready for my third attempt at getting aboard. I contacted approach, and they gave me a short hook to final. I hastily dirtied up and descended from 1,200 feet.

As I flew the ACLS needles, I got a nagging sensation that something wasn't right. My aircraft felt sluggish, and I was peering over the aircraft nose to see the ball. I quickly scanned my instruments, and everything appeared to be OK, but something still didn't seem right. I wondered for a moment if the glide slope was set steeper than normal. Shortly after calling the ball, I began to settle and started to see a low ball on the lens.

Paddles called, "Power." I responded with too much power and boltered once again. I experi-



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enced a huge settle at the end of the landing area when I rotated to on-speed. Even though it was dark, there was enough moonlight to see I was settling toward the water. This scared me, and my survival instincts kicked in. I selected afterburner and heard the air boss screaming over the radio,

“Three one two. Climb! Climb!”

Shaken a bit and finally at a comfortable altitude above the flight deck, I said with a not-so-steady voice, “I need to speak to my CATCC rep.” Before proceeding to the tanker for the third time, I told my rep I had a large settle after boltering. Something seemed wrong with the aircraft, and it didn’t feel like it was flying correctly. My rep told me to check my engine instruments and my flight-control page to see if there were any Xs or flight-control BLINs. Everything was fine. Was I imagining things?

My rep then advised me, “Fly a good approach and keep the ball on the happy side.” Even though it wasn’t said, I think everyone knew I was having difficulty getting aboard, and I just was getting fatigued. After all, I had made three attempts to come aboard and now was on my third tanking evolution, as well.

Once again, I got gas and planned on doing my best to get on deck. I didn’t get a short hook to final like my last pass, so this time I didn’t feel rushed to dirty up and do too many things at once. As I did my landing checklist, I realized my on-speed indication was several knots slow. I couldn’t recall what it was on my last approach. Did I even do one on my last approach? On my auxiliary radio, I passed to my rep my AOA on-speed indication was 136 knots. He agreed it was a little slow, but everything should be OK, and he told me to continue and fly a good pass.

Before reaching 1.5 miles from the boat, paddles called contact and talked me aboard. Apparently, they wanted me to land as badly as I wanted to, and they were not going to take any chances on my boltering again. I grabbed the ace, but it didn’t matter to me because I was happy to be on deck.

I still felt I hadn’t imagined things and checked my AOA probe on postflight. I had done

some damage while tanking. The right AOA probe clearly was bent. Things made a little more sense. Now that I was on deck, I thought more clearly. I don’t know why I hadn’t thought about my AOA probe being damaged airborne. Perhaps, it was a result of fatigue and feeling some urgency to get on deck. Had I not felt so rushed on the pass before my frightening settle—which aircraft data later showed had been to 32 feet—I would have done a proper landing checklist and discovered my on-speed indication was reading slow, as well. I now knew, not only was I a little slow during my approach, but I was seven knots slow. This explained why something just didn’t feel right and why I was peering up over the nose of my aircraft to see the ball.

There were several lessons learned. First, I started with a minor problem: I couldn’t dump fuel. Instead of troubleshooting the problem at low altitude at night while flying an approach, I should have told marshal I couldn’t make my approach time. I wouldn’t have been rushed. I could have prevented a long and painful night recovery if I had flown a good pass the first time.

Second, no matter how rushed one may feel, there is always time for a full landing checklist. Had I done mine each time, I would have discovered my on-speed indication was wrong earlier and could have handled things differently.

Last, I learned to trust my instincts. If you think something is wrong, it probably is. I didn’t think my airplane was flying correctly. If I had thought more about it, I would have remembered I had experienced a basket slap during tanking. After all, it was only a few weeks earlier that a pilot in my ready room had been relaying a very similar situation. Instead of learning from his mistakes, I unfortunately had to learn the hard way—I, too, got to stand in front of my peers and tell the same story. 

Lt. Lynch flies with VFA-15