

**W**e all have the “dark and stormy night” stories, or we will one day. The course of events that puts you there happens fast and without regard to your wants and desires. When the event is over, all you can do is learn from it, don’t do it again, and tell others. So, we write *Approach* articles and hope others don’t follow in

our footsteps. It can be hard to relive the event and reveal your mistakes to the entire aviation community, but by sharing, we all can learn.

My story began on a very dark night. It was the final week of a noneventful C2X. Fragged for the 1200 to 0500 ASW alert 30, it was a tossup whether we would launch or not. I thought



# My Dark and Stormy Night

By Lt. Wade Iverson

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of reasons for us not to launch. We were only hours to the next phase, and I hoped the powers-that-be would realize the timing was bad. Also, the sub was very covert, and the P-3 most likely would not get any sniffs. Nonetheless, the 2300 brief time arrived, and I grabbed my crew to brief in CIC; I still doubted we'd launch.



A courtesy nod of agreement from the TAO, followed by a last-minute update to the ASTAC, and we walked aft from CIC to the hangar. After pulling up a few large, white toolboxes to serve as a makeshift ready room, we settled in for the NATOPS brief. My crew had a fairly new and inexperienced H2P and AW. As such, we briefed the whole mission and spent sufficient time discussing our procedures and expectations during the takeoff and landing. After the brief, I read the book at the maintenance shop. The first flight the next morning was a CATM event, using the Hellfire-training missile to practice laser targeting.

I signed the ADB, and we headed to pre-flight, where we went through the first several steps in the alert checklist—to stay ahead of the “alert-30 game.” The bird looked good, and, even though I would not use the CATM for my mission if we launched, I carefully looked it over. I even momentarily removed the large, yellow, seekerhead cover to check for defects in the seekerface. I then replaced the cover. I left the aircraft at the hauled-forward on the flight deck to allow the next crew to use hangar-face lighting for an easier preflight. After all, I probably wasn't launching.

With our preflight preparations complete, except for traversing the bird to the flight line, I set the crew free to hit the rack if they chose. I would be up for a while taking care of some taskers, and I would tear the crew from their slumbers if we needed to launch—slim chance. I already had crew rested, in case we did launch.

I snuck onto the detachment's office computer, between the maintainers checking e-mail, and settled into my mound of to-do lists. Several hours later, after multiple trips to combat to check on the status of the P-3's hunt, I thought it safe to return to the relative comfort of my room and rack out. Besides, we had only a few short hours left on our alert period; we were not going to launch. I let the folks in combat know where I was going and headed to the pit.

I barely had hung my flight suit on the screw that jutted out from the side of the locker by my rack and closed the curtains to shut out the

constant glow of the overhead red light when the stateroom phone rang. I looked at my watch, closed my eyes, and slowly shook my head on the government pillow I had tried to disguise with a pillowcase from home—we were launching.

We had gotten the call against my predictions, and now we had 30 minutes to be airborne—not a problem. We had been proactive by completing the brief and the preflight. All we needed was to get a brief from combat, spot the bird, fire it up, and go. After rousing my crew from their racks, I went to combat for the details on what suddenly had changed. I returned to the flight deck to prep for launch and began the chain of events that would lead to frantic power calls and the scariest moment I ever have had in a cockpit.

After all the preps, it took some time to get all the information from CIC, along with another delay getting the aircraft spotted on the deck. I thought, “What was taking so long?” Another 10 minutes lost. The bird finally was spotted, and, after one last walk-around to check tail tie-downs and engine plugs, we strapped in. I took the left ATO seat to practice the button-crunching skills and to give my copilot right seat experience.

Time to launch was getting close, but I told myself not to hurry and cause my crew to miss something. “Thorough and steady” is how I had briefed the crew earlier in the hangar, and that is what I would show them.

The flight-deck crew was a little slow in getting up, and there was a delay for the boat-deck crew. How long does it take to FOD walk a flight deck half the size of a tennis court? Another 10 minutes lost.

Finally, everything was ready to go: a red deck for engine starts. After I glanced up and got a call from paddles, I realized the HARS bar was not working. Without a visible horizon at night, all lighting systems must be working on a small boy for us to launch. I looked out the window; it was as inky black as any night gets. No light, no launch. The 35-minute mark passed with no HARS, and it looked like we were not going to launch—I was back into my comfort mode.

Spinning on deck, with half of the takeoff

checklist complete and a heartbeat away from shutting down, I again started to settle into the mindset this event was going to be an exercise in futility. Again, fate stepped in just as I keyed my mike to tell paddles we were going to call it a day, or night, or whatever. Suddenly, the HARS bar illuminated the dark, and we were clear to go. I got myself back into the box. I thought, “Ready to go. Amber deck for breakdown. Review the takeoff checks...looks good, signal for chocks and chains, four chains, two chocks, personnel clear, ready.” My dark and stormy night began.

The relative winds were to port, which made it a right seat takeoff. Beams open, green deck, lift. We were airborne, and, after a gauge check, a slide back, and a pedal turn, the pilot took off into the blackness. While lifting off the deck of a small boy at night, you want to see three rates of climb before nosing over the aircraft to get single-engine airspeed. My copilot either got vertigo or broke down his scan, but the needles that usually started moving up started moving down—on a dark night, with a pure instrument scan, that is a bit disconcerting.

After a few motivating “power” calls from me and a dip on the RadAlt to 45 feet, the needles again moved in the right direction. Overcompensating for power, we now were passing 350 feet with zero airspeed. A little direction was traded for a bit of airspeed, and we were OK. We had altitude, airspeed, and the comforting glow of RadAlt hold; we were ops normal.

I soon discovered everyone has a bad night, and a learning curve is a fact of life. After we called “ops normal” and quickly debriefed nighttime takeoffs, I began the after-takeoff checklist.

“No problem,” I told myself, “everything would be all right now. We could chalk up flight hours and return when the sun was up.”

Then, we got to the step reviewing Hellfire status. I did the step in the takeoff checks that called for removing the CATM cover. Right? Nope. I had stopped the checklist when the ship’s HARS bar was bent. When the lighting came up so suddenly, I pulled the chocks and chains and prepped for launch. I just was doing ASW, not thinking about ASUW, and I quickly had reviewed the takeoff checklist. I now was

flying around at night, with the cover on my simulated missile posing a FOD hazard. The helmet helped soften the blow when I smacked myself upside the head. The right thing to do was to admit my mistake, recall flight quarters, and remove the cover.

Now I looked like an idiot, plus I had to go back to that dark place from which I just had escaped. OK, life goes on. I took the controls for the approach because I knew my copilot was having a bad night. Flight quarters were called, paddles got the story, and he set up to pass the numbers. It was my turn to stare into the dark and stormy night and live life on the steep, aviation-learning curve.

I still was frazzled from the takeoff and unnerved for missing the cover. Things were quiet, I briefed my copilot I would have the instruments, and he visually would have the ship. In hindsight, I should have been clearer and stated he still needed to back me up on the approach profile with numbers and checkpoints. He also needed to provide a visual scan to help me adjust for lineup. We began the approach, and the CDI indicated on lineup, but, at one mile out, the lineup lights didn't look right. After calling paddles to restate BRC, we were off by about 20 degrees. "OK, still time, let me try and fix it," I thought.

My scan broke down because I boresighted on lineup. I was a little close, so I decelerated while still correcting for lineup. I finally realized the crewman was calling 50 knots closure, and I was just 0.4 miles out. The "this is stupid" caution light came on in my head, and I decided to wave off and try again. The low-collective, nose-high attitude I had put in to help slow and correct my lineup had tilted the lift vector too far aft—my lift was gone. I had put myself into the black hole. I no longer was flying but was tail-sliding into the darkness.

If anyone has heard the increasingly panicked calls of paddles, it is not something easily forgotten. I still remember it to this day. Even while I commenced the waveoff, "Power... Power... Power!... Power!" came over the radios, and I realized how dire the situation was. I made sure my nose was level, so the power pull put the lift vector in the right direction: straight up.

One, two, three rates of climb, and I caught the green glow of the flight-deck lights pass behind us through the right window. Two hundred feet, safe, single-engine airspeed, and RadAlt on—we were again ops normal.

After clearing the dryness out of my mouth and the seat cushion out the other end, we told paddles we were going to take a minute to recage and then come in for the alternate approach. We did just that: recaged, briefed everyone's duties for the approach, and finally made an uneventful approach to the words, "in the trap...trapped." We removed the CATM cover and made a good nighttime takeoff from the back of the boat to complete the mission.

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What happened? Why did it happen? What did I take away from it? Always assume you'll go flying, and plan accordingly. Never take yourself out of the "box" until you're in the rack, with the paperwork signed. Even though I had taken all the steps to make sure we would have a quick and trouble-free launch, subconsciously I had taken myself out of flying mode and out of the cockpit.

Checklists are there for a reason; make sure every step is done, every time. The one time you forget or solely rely on memory, you're gonna get bit.

Make sure everyone in the cockpit understands what their role is and what the crew's expectations are for any evolution. Good communication is critical on any team; a lack of it can be fatal in aviation. The last lesson I learned is if it doesn't feel right, try it again the next pass. Waveoffs are free, and SH-60Bs have a \$25-million price tag.

Am I a wiser aviator because of that dark and stormy night? You bet. However, I would have preferred reading it in an article: I'm still picking out seat cushion. 

Lt. Iverson flies with HSL-49.