

# STOP ALREADY

By Lt. Bryan Schwartz

**M**uch like any other flight, we briefed, manned-up, walked, and launched on time. The feeling was exhilarating, as always, while we maintained station profile. Once the mission was over, we cleaned up the aircraft and headed home.

On the return, the crew in the back alerted us to an unsafe indication on the HF radio's trailing-wire antenna. We broke out the checklist, went through the NATOPs procedures, and the unsafe indication went out—problem fixed. To be on the safe side, we discussed minimizing the use of reverse thrust during the landing rollout.

With the wire situation dealt with, we had a warm and fuzzy feeling as I set up for an uneventful “on and on” PAR. At least, the approach was uneventful; the real fun began once we touched down.

After gently lowering the nosewheel to the deck, I

tried to bring the power levers into reverse thrust. This task should be easy, but it wasn't this night. When I pulled back the power levers to flight idle, I couldn't get them up and over the detent into the ground range. I tried twice before telling the aircraft commander (in the copilot seat) of the problem.

Although the power-lever lock had been checked during the landing check and again while reviewing the landing checks complete, I thought the lock might be our problem. My copilot apparently thought the same and made sure the power-lever lock was aft. The metal power-lever lock prevents the pilot from pulling the power levers into the ground range, and it only is used for shipboard landings.

As we rolled down the runway, trying to stop a 48,000-pound aircraft with 2,200 horsepower still being



produced, my copilot remembered an emergency during which a circuit breaker had popped and prevented the pilots from pulling a power lever aft. He quickly checked the circuit breakers—they were all in. An aircraft gripe, from an earlier flight, about a distinct pull to the left during ground operations also came to mind.

Runway continued to tick by as my copilot tapped on the right brake to maintain centerline. We were below emergency braking speed, so tapping the brake should not have made a difference, but, since our night was going so well, it did. Tower told us we had sparks coming from the right side of our aircraft—a report quickly verified by our NFOs in the back. Tower then asked if we wanted to declare an emergency. With my copilot busy troubleshooting, while I tried to maintain control of the aircraft, I told tower, “Stand by.”

As the airspeed slowly bled down, I started losing rudder effectiveness, and more right brake was needed to keep the aircraft on centerline. Our airspeed slowed as we approached the long-field arresting gear.

I remembered what our skipper always says, “Never pass up the long-field gear with your hook up.” So, I dropped the hook and told tower, “Tower, Eagle 4 declaring an emergency.”

At 50 knots, and with our brakes a blazing inferno, I took the long-field gear approximately 10 feet left of centerline. I felt the tug of the gear and was relieved—until we picked up a severe left drift. The right side of the arresting gear worked as advertised, but the left side, we later discovered, did not pay out at all. The hook slid along the wire until hitting the “cow bell,” the rubber connector that connects the wire to the tape. At that point, the hook spit the wire, and our hearts thumped harder.

My copilot, feeling the same thing, stood on the brakes and yelled at me, “Stand on the brakes! Stand on the brakes!”

I quickly replied, “I already am!”

Unknown to us, our brake lines on the right side had burned through, so our brake pressure aided in the left drift. In case you may have forgotten, we still had 2,200 horsepower pushing us down the runway. Many expletives filled the cockpit as we rolled toward the runway edge. When we neared the edge, my copilot reached up to shut down both engines with the emergency T-handles, hoping to finally bring this ride to a halt.

Fortunately, I switched the brake-selector valve from NORM to AUX, which allowed us to have emergency-

braking capability without the engines online. Standing on the brakes and holding full nosewheel steering to the right, we still drifted left toward the runway-edge lights. We continued to roll as both engines spooled down. My copilot pulled the parking-brake handle, and, apparently, whatever was left on the wheels, and was not on fire, brought us to a halt.

The aircraft stopped five to six feet short of the mud, with the main-landing gear straddling the runway edge lights. Somehow, we missed every light. As we began to emergency exit the aircraft, I saw fire on the left wheel. I yelled to my copilot, “We have a fire on the left, fire on the left, going out the overhead hatches!”

My copilot grabbed me and said, “We have a fire on the right, too. Which one is worse?”

The fire on the right was worse, so we exited out the main-entrance hatch. Everyone got clear of the aircraft, and no one was hurt.

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This event shed some light on previously unknown limitations of the field-arresting gear. There is a published maximum speed for the E-28 bi-directional gear, but there is no published minimum speed. We discovered if you engage the gear at a speed as slow as ours, you may or may not supply the 6,500 pounds of break-away force required to pull it out of battery. Both sides of the arresting gear were tested and found to be within limits. But our arrestment only produced enough energy to allow the right side to pay out.

Many ready-room discussions followed our event. Although we never found what prevented the power levers from getting into the ground range, we agreed the use of NATOPs and good crew-resource management resulted in minimal damage to the aircraft.

I flew the aircraft again the next day. Our CO commended us for keeping the aircraft out of the mud and on the hard surface. The next day, our reward for doing such a good job handling the emergency was another exciting day of station profile. 

Lt. Schwartz flies with VAW-113.