

Strip Alert— Speed Versus Accuracy

Pressure is

*“a compelling or constraining influence...
on the mind or will.”*

—*The American Heritage Dictionary*

By Capt. Brian Stempjen, USMC

While deployed in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF), crews experience the unique pressure induced by standing daily strip alerts. At the beginning of each shift, pilots and aircrew prepare their aircraft and flight equipment for launch at a moment's notice within the next 12 hours. After they man their aircraft and conduct flight- and crew-coordination briefs, the pilots and aircrew return to their workspaces to carry out their daily tasks. They remain ready, though, to drop everything and head to the line when called.

From this strip-alert posture, the most common missions we support are close-air support (CAS) for engaged ground forces and escort of assault-support aircraft on casualty-evacuation (CasEvac) missions. When the squadron operations-duty officer (ODO) receives a launch order, he activates an aural signal. Pilots meet outside the ready room for a ride to the flight line in one of the squadron's Gator all-terrain utility vehicles. By the time the pilots reached the AH-1W, the ground crew already has removed the aircraft's securing gear and is preparing the aircraft for engine start. The aircrew rapidly don their survival vests and get on board. The pilots start and arm the aircraft, complete preflight checks, and normally begin their taxi for launch seven to eight minutes after receipt of the initial launch order.

In a scenario where every minute might mean the difference between the life and death of another Marine, soldier, or coalition force member, the pressure to move quickly is powerful.

Much of a professional aviator's efficiency and execution is a product of correct habit patterns; this is why cockpit simulators and repetition are effective training tools. When these habit patterns are disrupted, modified, or rushed, mistakes can result. Whether it's an unfastened harness or a failure to recognize the omission of a critical checklist item, actual and perceived pressure can alter habit patterns and increase the likelihood of a mishap. Aircrew are not the only ones susceptible. When pilots come running, ground crew are subject to the same sense of urgency to make the launch. They also have a strong desire to quickly get the aircraft in the air, which makes them subject to more mistakes.

OIF squadrons have executed strip-alert missions safely and effectively for several years. However, the time-critical nature of these missions can cause a pilot to rush and be susceptible to errors, especially early in deployment. This type of rapid launch is not practiced often by aircrew until arrival in-country. Some squadrons have tried to simulate these scenarios in pre-deployment training, but rarely often enough or with all



essential personnel. Typical aircrew habit patterns are not initially well-developed for this tight timeline and can be broken in a pilot's attempt to meet some perceived critical time limit.

Certain missions clearly require a quick launch to succeed. Actual pressure does exist. We are in a real war, and it's critical we provide timely support. With practice and rigid adherence to procedures, launches consistently can be made within the seven-to-eight-minute time frame described. Pilots, however, often confuse a requirement to launch in a specified amount of time for a requirement to go as fast as they possibly can. This distinction is important and leads many to cut corners or rush, because they feel they have to be faster. This situation can be caused by overly aggressive individuals and commands, who honestly are trying to improve the overall situation in any way they can. For most, the intentions that create this perceived pressure are good but display a failure on the part of the individual to accurately assess the risk added versus the reward gained by trying to save that few extra seconds. Any process eventually will reach a point at which it has been made as efficient as possible, while remaining safe. A fine line must be walked and strictly enforced.

Protection from this self-imposed threat will come through adherence to established procedures

and NATOPS. Squadrons must make a professionally executed launch the goal; simply being faster than the other guy isn't the goal. This standard starts with ready-room leadership. If a new pilot sees a senior instructor violate procedures while turning up for an immediate mission, can we be surprised when he does the same thing?

Predeployment training also should include practice launches for aircrew and ground-maintenance personnel. This training must be realistic and include as many of the required personnel as possible. Many squadrons already implement a series of combat-crew simulators for all aircrew before deployment. Using these events to augment training in the aircraft reduces risk to aircraft and possible emergencies.

Time standards should be set by the squadron, based on the experience and proficiency of the aircrew. These standards should be enforced by the squadrons to make sure all procedures are completed correctly and inefficiencies are eliminated.

If we can respect the time-critical reality of the mission, while reducing the mistakes from chasing a few inconsequential extra seconds, we will, in the end, offer more effective and efficient support to the Marines and Soldiers outside the wire. 

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