

It was a warm, late June day off the coast of Jacksonville, Fla., a perfect day to kick fledgling carrier naval aviators out of the nest with a steel-toed boot. I was about to join the proud tradition of tailhook aviation in a T-45C, bagging my first carrier landings aboard USS *George Washington*. Ten traps, four touch-and-goes, and a few ACM flights were all that stood between me and the Wings of Gold.

As one of the first classes to CQ in the T-45C, we had added incentive to perform. I didn't want to be the first student to DQ in the new

platform. The "Super Goshawk" model has a cockpit layout similar to the FA-18, complete with a working HUD and velocity vector.

The plan was to get two touch-and-goes and six traps the first day and finish the requirements the next day. I drew lucky No. 113 for my machine and set out to do some good work. I didn't intend to tie the low-altitude record.

Launch, rendezvous and marshal were completed without incident. Before I knew it, I was abeam the ship. Coming around the 90 and peeking at the carrier for the first time is something I never

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by Lt. Justin Hendrickson



Coming around the 90 and peeking at the carrier for the first time is something I never will forget.

will forget. My first touch-and-goes and traps, though maybe not spectacular from the LSO platform, were thrilling for me. We listened to lots of lectures on the dangers of the catapult launch, and we knew where our feet, hands, trim, flaps, and everything else were supposed to be. The raw power of the cat stroke was an eye-opener every time I went down the track.

Halfway through my first-day requirements and below hold-down, I signaled the yellowshirts and was sidelined for fuel. This short break gave me a chance to reflect on my last couple passes, watch a few of my buddies' traps, and triple-check my takeoff checklist.

After refueling, I taxied to the bow cats and readied for another launch.

The cat shot was as strong and exhilarating as the previous couple, which was why my brain stem could not reconcile what was happening to my jet as the deck disappeared behind me: a full settle off the cat.

Time stopped. I looked at my airspeed, and saw I had plenty. What the heck was happening? I faintly heard someone screaming in my headset, "Off the cat: Climb! Climb! Climb!" I was afraid that if I pulled back too hard, I would stall, even though I had enough airspeed.

After carefully milking the aircraft up to pattern altitude and drilling upwind, I heard a lead-safe whisper, "Turn," in my headset. That snapped my attention back from almost flying into the water. I focused on landing again. After an uneventful trap, I was sidelined. My mind raced over every detail of the last cat shot, trying to figure out what had just happened.

About the time my squadron tower rep (who surely had just been chewed up and spit out by the Air Boss) asked me what had happened, it had dawned on me what I'd done wrong. "Sir, I accidentally ran the trim down during the cat stroke," I

explained. In the T-45, you're supposed to cup your right hand in a "U" shape just aft of the stick. When the holdback fitting released and my jet exploded forward, my hand, out of surprise, inexperience or fear, grabbed the top of the stick. My fingers curled over the top of the stick with the trim button squarely under my palm, getting the black squeezed out of it. To my surprise, the ship's skipper didn't end my short naval-aviation career right then and there. I was allowed to finish my last couple of traps for the day.

The first thing everyone wanted to see after I landed back at NAS Jax was my HUD tape to see how low I had settled. Unfortunately, the tape



Photo by Matthew J. Thomas

The "Super Goshawk" model has a cockpit layout similar to the FA-18. Proper hand placement on the controls is critical.

malfunctioned, but a lead-safe orbiting above told me my jet had left a wake in the water that was longer than the carrier. Because of bad weather, I had the entire next day to sit and ponder my fiasco. The weather cleared, and, after a pep talk from a few IPs, I went out and got my qual.

For students in advanced flight training, the major focus of the CQ phase is performance behind the boat, but your performance in front of the boat is equally important. It will kill you just as quickly.

Good habit patterns keep aviators—especially the single-seaters—out of the water and on the 3-wire. I'm riding the stroke these days with my right hand wrapped tightly around the Hornet's "towel rack" and nowhere near the trim button. 🦅