

# The "Scapegoat"



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I just couldn't hold onto it. I suspect there was some kind of control failure, or else the downwind oleo collapsed just as I approached flying speed. Maybe a tire blew, but then I didn't touch the brakes during the roll. I had done everything right – complied with NATOPS all the way – but just couldn't hold onto it.

As soon as I saw we were going off the edge, I told my rear seat stick to stand by. I punched us both out as the bird homed in on the arresting gear enclosure.

Funny thing. As the canopy blew and the rear seat "exploded," I thought – perhaps I'd forgotten something. Was there anything else I could have done to save the bird? No! Nothing! I had tried my level best. I was in the clear. ("In the clear?" Where did that thought come from?)

After a quick checkup for me and my back-seater at sickbay, and treatment for a skinned elbow, I went back to the scene where the one winged, seatless Skyhawk perched on its one remaining gear.

The skipper, there with the ASO and Ops, wanted to know how I was and did I feel like talking right then.

"Sure, skipper, I'm OK." Wish I could have said the same for 307. She was a strike for sure.

The safety officer had his duty tape recorder, so we moved away from the immediate site so I could give him my side of the story. (There it goes again! "My side of the story?" What other side was there?)

The ASO started asking a few questions, and I wondered if the mike would pick up our words because of the wind. (Wind? My God! What did the tower say the wind was when they cleared me to roll? It was nearly 90 degrees from the right, but not bad enough to push me off the runway. No. No sweat in that area.)

ASO: You say after Tower cleared you for takeoff you lined in up in the middle of 28?

Me: Right down the centerline.

ASO: What winds did the tower give you?

Me: Uh... let me see. Something like, variable 360 to 010 at around 12 to 15. I remember it was a little gusty. Up to 25 knots or so. But I've never had any problems with crosswinds – especially on takeoff. Hell, I've got close to 2000 hours in the A-4. That should count for something.

ASO: Yeah, you oughta know what the bird can do and can't do by now. Uh, Bob, did you think about aborting when your port tire failed?

Me: What port tire? I mean, I didn't have a blowout – did I?

ASO: Sure did. Take a look at what's left of your port tire. Nothing but threads; the rim's all chewed up.

Me: (That tire had a bunch of plys showing when I preflighted. The troubleshooter wanted to change it, but I told him not to sweat it – that I was only going to make one landing.)

ASO: Another thing. Neither droptank ruptured, and from what I can tell, it looks like your right drop was only half-filled. Didn't you check them visually?

Me: (Half-filled! Hell, they both sounded full when I tapped them on preflight. Damn plane captain didn't have the caps open – and I was in a hurry.)

ASO: Tell you what, Bob – why don't you go ahead and knock off the rest of the day! When you feel up to coming in tomorrow, we'll talk about it. Right now, relax. OK?

Me: (Relax? That's easy for him to say. It's not all hanging out for him. Have one little accident and they twist things around to make you the scapegoat. Why don't they pin it on Mother Nature? The crosswind was her idea. I was just doing my job.)

Well, the CO didn't want me to drive home, so I called my wife to pick me up.

Leaning against the hangar, waiting, I decided that I was a victim of circumstances. This day, this one lousy day, all the odds were stacked against me. I was handling the situation, no sweat, 'til my luck ran out. Should have checked my Bio-Rhythm chart this morning – it's probably a critical day.

If it hadn't been for that complacent plane captain or that idiot who fueled the bird – or if the troubleshooter had gone ahead and changed that weak tire despite my objections – I wouldn't be in the AAR limelight now.

Another thing. Tower should have been more explicit in their wind information. Hell, I was busy briefing that nugget rear-seater on how to contact Departure.

Oh, well, I still think the oleo bottomed out, and I couldn't get full throw on my ailerons into the wind. They'll more than likely find something jammed in the aileron power package – or whatever.

Here she comes. Wonder if she's speaking to me yet after my Happy Hour scene last night? ◀