

The Unravel



Photo by Matthew J. Thomas

By Lt. Rich Winstead

I found myself in the front right seat of the lead Prowler on the first night of Exercise Global Strike, flying out of Nellis AFB. As a junior electronic-countermeasures officer (ECMO) in a Prowler squadron, I was preparing for deployment to MCAS Iwakuni.

The pilot in the left seat also was relatively junior, but we were flying with experienced personnel in the “trunk,” and the entire crew thoroughly had been involved in the planning of the night’s mission. We walked to the jet feeling well-prepared and eager to perform during the first night of the exercise; we were not overconfident.

The evening soon unraveled. We diligently were watching our timeline to make our taxi and takeoff time when clearance said they had no information on our two Prowlers. Normally, a mistake involving your clearance easily can be fixed with a radio call to the SDO, who calls you back when they have worked their magic. Unfortunately, we were on a [detachment](#) and had no radio communication with our SDO. We immediately thought our planning was going to be wasted because of

a scheduling mix-up by the red-flag staff.

While I worked with base ops on the radio to solve the problem, the back-seaters opened the rear canopy in the hope of relaying a message to our SDO. During what seemed like an eternity waiting on our clearance, the pilot noticed the duty runway had been [changed](#) from what we briefed. He immediately pulled out the SID to familiarize himself with the new departure. I gave this [change](#) in plan very little attention and continued to beg for our clearance.

After about 30 minutes of two Prowlers turning gas into heat in our line area, clearance finally was granted, and I eagerly called for the section’s taxi. At this point, I was focused solely on getting the Prowlers into the fight as soon as possible. Even though we had an extra 30 minutes on deck, I seriously was behind.

Because the duty runway had been [changed](#), and neither I, nor the pilot, ever had flown at Nellis before, I was not confident of our taxi route. After referencing the airfield diagram and as both Prowlers approached the holdshort, I called for the section’s takeoff. This

would have been the perfect opportunity to stop both jets, recage everyone's brains, and catch up. The only thing anyone in our jet, other than the pilot, had done so far was try to get a clearance to take off.

Instead of catching up, I turned to the pilot and asked, "Do you understand the departure?"

He replied, "Yep."

Like a good ECMO, I had the SID out but had done no serious study. I relied solely on the pilot to get us safely out of Nellis' airspace.

The departure is relatively simple: turn right, climb, and do not fly into Las Vegas International's airspace. During the departure, ECMO 2 and I were looking out the 5-o'clock position trying to pick up Dash 2, when the pilot very calmly stated, "That's strange."

I immediately saw our TACAN information jump all over the spectrum. My response should have been to cycle GPS to the appropriate navaid and 'fess up to our wingman for assistance. Instead, I and the entire crew committed the cardinal sin of *fixation*.

What finally snapped us out of our trance was a call from ATC asking us if we had started our turn yet. We

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had started our turn, but, because of our navaid troubles, we had strayed a little too close to Las Vegas International, and almost had violated their airspace. The pilot then asked me what our next altitude gate was, so we wouldn't fly into any terrain in the immediate area. Because we had not properly briefed the simple departure, I had no immediate answer for him. I referenced the SID, and we continued our climb. We became concerned when Dash 2 made the following radio call, "You are 2,000 feet low. Climb! Acknowledge."

This call from our wingman potentially saved our lives; our lack of situational awareness prevented us from realizing we were at 6,000 feet MSL, with terrain up to 5,900 feet MSL three miles ahead on our flight path. Keep in mind, this was a *night* flight. We acknowledged his call and increased our rate of climb to meet the altitude gates.

We eventually made it to the area and joined the flight, though late. The return-to-base was standard, with

no extra calls from ATC or our wingman. Both Prowlers thoroughly debriefed the night's events and felt very fortunate to have survived to learn from the mistakes.

The brief failed to include departures from both runways, and we blindly expected the flight to follow the brief. Night departures from Nellis normally launch to the north, toward the operating area. That route is what we were accustomed to, which was all the more reason to have properly briefed the unexpected departure to the south.

The entire aircrew became consumed with getting clearance for the section, and only the pilot had SA enough to familiarize himself with the impending departure.

I once again allowed myself to become overly focused with something other than the aviation at hand. Once we were on the roll, and even though I sensed I wasn't prepared, I pressed as hard as possible to quickly get both jets airborne, allowing basic aviation principles to take a back seat.

The most dangerous mistake we made as a crew was to *fixate* on the TACAN failure. Even with an old jet like the Prowler, we had plenty of tools to properly fly a departure. At the very least, we had positive radio comms with ATC, and we easily could have asked for assistance, rather than scaring our wingman and endangering ourselves. We are trained at a very early stage in our aviation careers to always maintain scan. No one in our jet scanned anything, except the TACAN failure.

Fixation has killed many aviators. We are very fortunate not to have added ourselves to that list.

My crew allowed a very simple malfunction to turn into an *Approach* article by breaking very basic rules of aviation and not adhering to the principles of ORM. Brief for contingencies, especially if you are unfamiliar with the airfield and the airspace. Don't fly if you are not ready. The holdshort is a great place to catch up and recage your gyro.

Do not *fixate*; use all your instruments and maintain scan.

Finally, don't be afraid to ask for help from outside the aircraft. We had ATC and a wingman standing by to assist; we only needed to ask. 🦅

Lt. Winstead flies with VAQ-132.