

You Gotta Know When To Fold 'Em

We have proven over and over in naval aviation that complacency kills, and it almost got me.

By Lt. Jason Mendenhall

“You’re on fire!”

Although never spoken, the signal from the nearby and out-of-breath petty officer was clear: “Get out now!”

As I stood at the end of the runway, staring at my partly burning jet, thankful to be alive, I considered the events of that fateful day in Al Asad, Iraq.

My mission for the day had been to operate the new shared-reconnaissance pod (SHARP), as our strike group entered its final two weeks in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom. After launching from the ship and checking in with “Ali Center,” I was told my Air Force tanker was cutting short its mission because of a mechanical failure. This change in plan would require me to collect images of my assigned target areas, transmit them to the ground station in Baghdad, and then head west to Al Asad for fuel.

Despite many briefs on divert options and a thorough in-flight review of the local procedures, I remained somewhat uneasy with the prospect of a fuel divert into an Iraqi airfield. Also, recent mishaps at this base had emphasized the importance of increased vigilance while operating in and out of the area. Unfortunately, my cautious attitude would subside after landing. I was relieved to be safe on deck, and excited to see the numerous MiG-25s and burned-out, armored personnel carriers from the opening days of the war. The hairs on the back of my neck settled as I

snapped a couple of pictures and took on the last bit of fuel before I taxied.

As I made the U-turn back through the hot pits located next to the hold short, I opted to leave my wings folded. My intent was to return to my checklist page after I had considered the unique departure procedures out of Al Asad. I called for takeoff, but in my rush to get airborne, I did not return to my checklist. After confirming my takeoff clearance with tower, I immediately advanced the throttles to military and released the brakes. I received all of the visual and aural indications one would expect. At first, I thought I had missed arming my seat, but it had been armed. My attention then turned to the DDI (digital-display indicator), where I only saw the “CK FLAPS” and “CK TRIM” cautions. There were other problems, however, including the “FCS” caution, BLIN codes, and various channels of my FCS page X’d out. As I continued to accelerate and maintain centerline, I completed the two items I thought had been forgotten: flaps and trim. Believing I now was configured for a normal field takeoff, I continued the roll.

As I pulled back on the stick at about 140 knots, I heard my call sign used in an abort call coming from a fellow aviator, who was parked on a nearby taxiway. After I took a few seconds to process that radio call, I initiated the abort procedures at nearly 190 knots. Finally, I



Photo by MCS3 Jon Hyde. Modified.

realized what was happening and placed the wing-fold switch into the spread position. I made sure the flaps were in full and tried to get as many surfaces into the wind as possible to help slow the aircraft. Not certain I had enough runway remaining, I decided to take a long-field arrestment. Afterward, I inadvertently set the parking brake. I then saw the ground crew pointing at the smoke coming from my left main-landing gear.

Only a couple minutes later, the left brake caught fire. Rescue crews then risked their lives to battle the flames torching the left main landing-gear door and a full drop tank that was next to a live GBU-12 and a \$5-million SHARP. The rescue crew expertly extinguished the fire and saved the plane. After a remarkable repair job by maintenance personnel, I flew back to the ship.

Many things went wrong that day, and I was the culprit. First, I let down my guard and became comfortable with the situation on deck. Even though, in several ways, the airfield resembles Fallon, there are major differences. Operations at Al Asad are by no means standard, and to treat them as such is asking for trouble.

We have proven over and over in naval aviation that complacency kills, and it almost got me. Nothing is routine about combat operations or field ops after four months at sea. The administrative portions of a flight are most likely to kill us. Whether it's dropping the pack on the way home from a level-3 upgrade

hop, or that initial join-up after takeoff, critical phases of flight always require our utmost attention—that's where we are most at risk.

My second mistake was to break a habit pattern. Checklists and habit patterns exist for a reason. There always will be distractions within the cockpit, and outside environmental factors always will compete for our attention, especially when operating somewhere like Iraq. The disciplined use of checklists will reduce the likelihood of a mishap.

Finally, I was overconfident in my abilities. By not adhering to my abort criteria, I assumed, at least subconsciously, I had the skill to identify why the master-caution light was on and to correct those items while on the roll, rather than simply aborting the takeoff. Before this mishap, I was the guy who said nothing like this ever would happen to me—I was wrong. Thank God, a CRM-conscious pilot had the presence-of-mind to switch to tower frequency and pull me out of my funk with the use of my call sign.

While I'm very thankful no one was injured and I'm still flying, only one thing stands between this type of mishap and a similar one for any of us: professionalism. Being a professional is a constant pursuit, and it should breed every other aspect of safe aviation, from tactical ability to flight discipline. 🇺🇸

Lt. Mendenhall flies with VFA-115.