

When to

By LCdr. Greg Byers

When would you call it quits? On a recent cross-country, I asked myself just that question. It was a good-deal hop down to sunny San Diego for the weekend. We were to leave on Thursday, but a routine inspection on our Prowler revealed the right engine had to be replaced. The maintainers worked overtime and swapped engines in time for a crew to fly a morning check flight. Other than a slightly lower than normal idle speed, but still within limits, the jet was 4.0.

We manned-up and went to start the right engine. The engine lit off with no problems, but, as it reached starter-cutout rpm, it flamed out. A cursory look found nothing wrong, and we tried again with the same result. The ADs again could find nothing wrong and wanted to watch the third start attempt, hoping to spot the problem.

Knowing after the third start attempt I would have the 30-minute penalty-waiting period, I advanced the throttle about a quarter inch to see if that would get it over the hump. I don't know if nudging the throttle was it or something else was going on, but the third time was a charm. After a successful start, I brought the engine to idle stop and noted the idle speed was at the bottom of the limit range. All other indications were normal, and we pressed.

After starting the left engine and going through all of our post start checks, hydraulic fluid began to leak from the right engine. We shut down both engines to fix the leak. Our maintenance did not have the replacement part, and they had to hunt all over the base to find one. As we watched our takeoff time come and go, maintenance found the part, and we were back in business.

We got the engine started, using the quarter-inch advance on the right throttle (I didn't want to give up a good thing), only to find



another hydraulic leak. Again, we shut down. A base-wide search found the proper part, and we started up for the third time. By now, we were well into the afternoon. While we quickly went through the post-start checks, the backseaters called metro and got an update to our dash 1. Our clearance still was open, and we were ready to roll.

I think maintenance was just as glad as we were when we finally taxied out of the line. As we approached the holdshort, I reached down to turn on my O₂, only to find the cockpit had become quiet. Realizing my O₂ hose was disconnected, I made a few half-hearted attempts

Say When



Photo by Paul Farley

to reattach it. Giving up for the safer solution, I stopped the jet, set the parking brake, and reattached the hose.

When I regained ICS, I heard tower ask if we needed assistance. ECMO 1 replied, “No,” and we were on our way. Tower came back and said it appeared we had leaked a bunch of fluid when we stopped. I made a U-turn on the taxiway and headed back to the line to get it checked. As we approached our puddle, I saw a fuel cap in the middle of it, which explained the puddle.

When we stopped in front of the puddle, we spilled more fuel. Tower had us hold position while they sent a truck to assist. It must have

been a slow day because three fire trucks showed up. One of the intrepid firemen approached the jet, looked underneath, and reported our center-line fuel cap was missing. I signaled I knew that because the cap was about 10 feet from his feet. He finally saw it and signaled back, “Hey, here it is.”

He picked up the cap, ran underneath the jet, put it on, and called tower. Tower said we were good to go. We replied, “Thanks, but our maintainers are on their way, and we would like them to look at it.” Our maintainers found nothing wrong, except the cap was on backward. At last, we were good to go.

We got our taxi clearance to the runway. I brought up power to get us moving, brought it back to idle to make the U-turn, and then the right engine flamed out.

“Okay we’re done,” I announced.

We taxied back to the line and shut down. The SDO, desperate to make a sortie, asked if we were going to try again. “No thanks,” was our polite reply.

When would you have called it quits? When an engine that was flaming out inexplicably on start finally kept running? After a recurring hydraulic problem? After three man-ups and a puddle of JP-5?

I must have bounced the throttle off the idle stop a dozen or so times before the engine finally quit that last time. Without the multiple other problems, it likely would have failed in the air. We definitely had some get-there-itis, and we all want to believe the maintainers when they say the aircraft is good to go, but, in this case, we were fortunate the engine flamed out on deck. 🇺🇸

LCdr. Byers flies with VAQ-140.