

By LCdr. Rick Butler

It was another typical, early November morning at Offutt AFB, Neb.: cold. As aircraft commander, my crew and I were preparing to launch as Airborne National Command Post (ABNCP) Secondary in the E-6B.

The flight-engineer-under-training (FE-T) called for “flight controls” on the after-start checklist. He expected to hear the normal response, “Checked,” but he looked surprised when I replied, “Something just doesn’t feel right.”

I turned and looked at my crew. I then realized my flight-deck crew included two new third pilots (3Ps), and a new navigator (NAV). Other than me, the qualified flight engineer (FE) (sitting in the observer seat) was the only other crew member with any significant flight experience. I explained to the FE about the resistance in the rudder pedals. Because the

rudder pedals had been checked on preflight, he presumed the resistance was because of the cold.

According to the E-6B NATOPS Flight Manual, an “increase in control forces during low-temperature ground checks can be expected because of binding, cable seals, and congealed oil in the snubbers and bearings.” Considering the rudder is hydraulically actuated, the NATOPS explanation could have accounted for the resistance, but my gut instinct told me differently.

As a fairly new aircraft commander, and, with the pressure of completing a high-visibility ABNCP mission, I easily second-guessed myself. But, other circumstances supported my gut instinct. This was the aircraft’s third flight of the week with the same cold-morning conditions, so, why should the flight controls feel different today?

Gut Instincts



Photo by Tech Sgt. Cary Humphries

I discussed my concern to the FEs, and they conducted another preflight inspection of the rudder. The FE-T, AD1 David Burcham, took his headset and the long ICS cord and stood under the aircraft's tail. As AM1 Shaun Garrison "kicked" the rudders from the flight deck, AD1 Burcham looked for abnormal indications. He didn't see any, but that check was only one part of his search.

When AM1 Garrison heard a call over the ICS, "You'd better come down here," he knew something was wrong. In spite of all the external conditions working against him, such as the bottom of the rudder towering 18 feet over his head, the operating auxiliary-power unit (APU), and wearing a double-ear David Clark headset, AD1 Burcham heard faint popping sounds he had not heard during his original preflight inspection.

The FEs inspected the rudder from a B-1 stand and discovered a patch on the lower, forward-leading edge of the rudder had broken off. The failed patch had caused the rudder to bind against the trailing edge of the vertical stabilizer—a great catch by the FEs.

The flight was cancelled. With support from several other crew members and the maintenance detachment, the FEs fixed the hazardous problem during the long, cold night.

How could I tell during my flight-control checks if the binding problem wasn't just the result of a cold jet? I don't know. Call it what you'd like, but the bottom line is we stopped the mission because something didn't "feel right." My actions led to the discovery of a potentially deadly problem. **Trust your gut instinct.** 🦅

LCdr. Butler flies with VQ-4.

When AM1 Garrison heard a call over the ICS, "You'd better come down here," he knew something was wrong.

