



By LCdr. Richard A. Rivera

After two years of instructor duty in VFA-106, I was ready to get back into operational flying. I just had received orders to the CVW-5 staff as the strike-operations officer. Because I hadn't been to the boat in over two years, I would join a small class of pilots to carrier qualify on board USS *George Washington* (CVN-73).

This opportunity sounded too good to be true. Our class was set at four instructor pilots bound for sea duty, one Cat III PXO, and three Cat I replacement pilots. The class had all the earmarks of a two-day evolution, allowing me to quickly get back home to my soon-to-be fiancé for some quality time together before heading to Japan. I looked forward to telling her harrowing tales of pitching decks and dark nights, but I wasn't prepared to tell her the story of my ejection-at-sea during Case I day, steady-deck operations.

Looking back on the mishap, I believe all signs pointed to the fact that it was just my day. Fortunately for me, instinct rather than skill kicked in, and I'm able to laugh and tell stories about it today.

The day before the event almost was criminal: CAVU day, with 31 knots of natural wind down the angle, followed closely by a CAVU night, with a moon seemingly bigger and brighter than I'd ever seen before. As I dusted off the rust on my first few passes, I realized just how painful life can be in the CQ environment. My first seven looks at the ship included two traps, two touch-and-goes, and three foul-deck waveoffs. After regrouping on deck, my next four passes went well, and I was off to night ops. After completing four "night" traps in a brilliant commander's moon, paddles asked if I would like two more. Well,

who really wants two more night traps? Since I *had* to get them, I couldn't pass on the opportunity to shine, given the flight conditions. The rest of the night went well, leaving me with just four more day traps and a COD ride to the beach, or so I thought.

After waking up at the crack of noon the next day (welcome to the boat), I was ready to complete four day traps and get off the ship. After showering and making a trip to the wardroom for chow, I was greeted in the ready room by paddles, who cleverly had altered the flight schedule. The revised schedule allowed yours truly to complete my traps early, with enough time for a trip home on the COD. Having flown in the FRS for more than two years, I was used to changes in the schedule, and this time a schedule finally seemed to have worked out in my favor. This was sign No. 1: I wasn't even supposed to be in that jet.

The man-up in my "family model" FA-18D was uneventful. I had no backseater; it is SOP in VFA-106 to allow aircrew to fly FA-18Ds solo when needed. Rather than sitting on the deck an extra 30 minutes watching CODs and Tomcats CQ, I readied for launch.

As I taxied to cat 2, I went through the flight in my head. I would depart and reenter to burn the extra gas that had been pumped into the jet the night before, and then enter the CQ pattern. The catapult shot went as expected, and I was up and flying.

Just beyond the initial, I heard tower call for everyone in the pattern to "delta easy," meaning something was amiss on the flight deck. Thinking back to day one, where the 3-wire was stripped all day, I immediately thought about the possibility of the ship stripping that wire again, even though I had seen all four wires in

battery before takeoff. I decided to spin, as there was a Hornet just off the bow.

As I came around, I saw a Tomcat at the initial. At that very moment, the boss called for the pattern to “charlie.” I decided to call “spin 90,” because I thought the Tomcat pilot hadn’t seen me. Much to my dismay, he decided not to enter the pattern via the break but instead decided to drop his landing gear upwind, right in front of me, before turning downwind.

Not knowing what to make of the situation, I decided to spin again, rather than go out to six or seven miles. Looking back, maybe I should have departed and then reentered the pattern. I had encountered sign No. 2: I had priority to break, so I should have been in front of the Tomcat that eventually landed in front of me, on the 4-wire.

With my temper under control, I came back around, entered the break with interval on the Tomcat, and got sign No. 3: The Tomcat was stuck in the landing area. I received a foul-deck waveoff and now was taking interval on a touch-and-go COD. In retrospect, I’m glad those guys didn’t trap; otherwise, we might have been down two good aviators, depending, of course, on the wire caught. Upon recovery, I found sign No. 4 that it was just my day: On my foul deck waveoff, I had beaten a Cat I RP to the bow by two seconds, as he was getting shot off of the deck. Again, I’m almost thankful it was me, rather than him who took the trap that day.

As I came off the 180, I saw the COD lifting off the bow, so I knew I’d be landing this time. I looked down and saw 6,400 pounds of gas remaining, which was 400 pounds below my max trap (after the foul-deck waveoff). The pass was going well, and I arrived at an on-and-on start, making the normal ball call. The rest of the pass was unremarkable until landing rollout.

As I touched down and went to mil, I thought I should have had caught the 3-wire; at least, that’s what my deck-spotting eyes told me. Instead, I began to roll out and felt the tug of the 4-wire against my 34,000-pound jet. I had only three traps to go, right? Wrong.

On rollout, I felt what appeared to be normal deceleration, followed by a tug on the jet. The jet then seemed to feel like it was skidding to the left. At this moment, I realized I had experienced the typical time compression many ejection survivors talk about. I analyzed all of these things in my head in the span of about one second. What was that? It feels odd. Something is not right. I’m not going to stop. And, oh \$#@! I reached down and pulled the yellow and black handle between my legs, while the jet still was completely on

the flight deck.

I couldn’t believe what was happening as I felt a huge acceleration up the rails. Thinking back, the first thing that came to mind as I felt the seat shoot up and right was, “What did I do wrong?”

The next thing I remember was silence as I saw my \$44-million training device splash into the water below me. That image is one I’ll never forget; it seemed to play over and over in my mind that night while I tried to sleep.

Before I knew it, gravity took over, and I found myself in the low-altitude-IROK regime. However, IROK was not the first thing on my mind, as I wanted to know where I would land. Having seen many ejection videos during safety stand-downs, I knew I didn’t want to hit the steel deck. By the time (which was not long) I looked over my left shoulder, I already was passing the left side of the flight deck, quickly plummeting toward the water on the port side of the boat.



Because the wind was a constant 30 knots, I hit the water in what felt like a 45-degree angle aft. The instant my feet hit the water, I knew I hadn’t done the most important step of the low-altitude-IROK procedures: Find my Koch fittings. A feeling of panic went through my head as I submerged only 30 feet from the gigantic

aircraft carrier. About the time I could think about my fate, I heard a large blast and found myself floating, with my back to the ship. The SEAWARS had done its job, and my horse-collar life vest automatically had inflated. I saw the parachute flying through the air, ultimately landing abeam the LSO platform.

I was alive and very happy, but I couldn't breathe. I removed my oxygen mask, quickly remedying that problem. For some strange reason, my next instinct was to see where the jet had landed. As I turned to the right, toward the bow of the boat, I immediately swallowed what seemed like a gallon of water. The swells were huge, but I managed to catch a glimpse of my training aid sinking—vertical stabilizers sticking out of the water—Davy Jones's locker. This situation felt very surreal to me, and I again began to wonder what I had done wrong.

I continued to turn toward the ship and never will forget the things I saw. My first sight was of two Sailors on the smoking sponson, having a drag. Their eyes widened when they realized I was floating by, and I gave them a thumbs up, signifying I was OK. The next thing I remember was someone on another sponson throwing me a life ring, which landed about five feet from the hull of the ship. With good flotation, I decided I wasn't going there. I began sculling away from the ship. Did I mention I looked straight up and saw people directly above me on the flight deck gazing down on me? I likened my trip down the port side of the ship to the first scene in the movie "Spaceballs." I was up close, and the ship seemed endless as it drove by me at two to four knots.

I heard the helicopter coming, so I decided to conserve energy and wait for its arrival. About that time, I saw my first familiar face standing on the flight deck, "Bert" Kiggans, VFA-106 LSO. When he saw I was OK, he smiled back and gave a big thumbs up. Oddly enough, we began conversing (that's how close I was to the ship, and yes, I still was in the water). I asked, "What the hell happened?"

He replied, "The 4-wire broke."

A huge feeling of relief came over me when I realized I was not at fault. I didn't know the carnage that had occurred on the flight deck.



The helicopter then showed up overhead the wreckage, about 50 yards away from me. I fell back on my water-survival training and began to wave my arms, throwing water up into the air. Every person within eyesight assisted in the effort by pointing to my cork-like body in the sea.

I gave the aircrewmembers a thumbs up as the rescue swimmer plummeted into the ocean near me. Understanding that my rescuer was better trained than me, I sat back and allowed him to prep my body for the ride to the aircraft. He removed things that could hinder my ability to smoothly ride up to the helicopter: namely my seat pan and kneeboard.

I lowered my visor, turned my head to the side, and crossed my arms as I rode skyward into my rescue craft. My brother, an SH-60 pilot, could appreciate my next statement: "I never have been so excited to be riding in a helicopter in my life!" They quickly took me to the ship, where I was happy to disembark standing up.

After stepping off the helicopter, I saw the chaos on the flight deck that had ensued after

my ejection. All told, 13 had been injured as a result of the parted wire “snapping back” on them. Fortunately, and somewhat amazingly, there were no deaths. I was taken to medical, where I found I was the least injured of those involved.

The medical experience and post-ejection paperwork was an ordeal I never want to repeat. After two hours of waiting for the injured to be treated, I had to urinate in a large cup, give 12 test tubes of blood, and pose for about 30 X-rays. I finally was released four hours later to the confines of our makeshift ready room, where I recreated my 72-hour history on paper for the mishap board.

No amount of training could have prepared me for this scenario. It happened quickly, without warning. I was fortunate to immediately recognize I was in a position with only one alternative: Pull the handle. I pray you never face that decision.

It was determined that the arresting-gear maintenance had been completed improperly, leading to down MAFs on the gear. Having

flown aircraft for more than eight years, it always has been drilled into my head never to take a “down” aircraft. I only can hope my ejection will remind everyone of this rule that, quite obviously, is written in blood.

Every piece of my survival gear worked, from the seat to the SEAWARS and automatic LPU inflation. From the time I pulled the handle until I was in the water was about seven to nine seconds. There wasn’t much time to execute low-altitude IROK procedures (not to mention my shock and confusion), making me a believer of all of the automated systems in our survival gear. I couldn’t thank the PRs and AMEs enough.

Finally, no one was killed because they all wore the appropriate safety gear necessary to work in the most dangerous environment in the world: the flight deck of an aircraft carrier. I think the survivors will agree with me on that point.

I consider myself fortunate to be alive after this mishap. I hope you’ll consider the events I’ve described the next time you trap. 🦅

LCdr. Rivera is with CVW-5.

Did You Preflight, Sir?

By PR2(AW) Vernard P. Silver

I’ve seen many things in my 10 years in the Navy. I’ve been on four cruises and seen much of what the world has to offer. While at my last command, I had seen that planes sometimes have problems that defy gravity. I’ve also seen pilots get dressed in their flight gear without thinking twice about what survival gear they have, or its condition. Some pilots most likely would fly naked if they had the chance.

I enlisted in the Navy in 1994. From boot camp, I went straight to A school. I had the time of my life. I showed up at my first command, an

