

Hot Switch

By LCdr. Eric Smith

The sequence of events leading up to my night flight did not violate any instruction, SOP guidance, or CRM check. However, I found myself in a situation no aviator ever wants to be in while on a flight deck.

My last flight had been exactly one week earlier, as we operated off the coast of Japan. My three previous flights, however, also had been night flights, so I was accustomed to the nighttime ritual. We pulled into Sasebo, Japan, for some much needed R&R, and, four days later, we were back underway.

The following afternoon we completed our NATOPS crew brief. Because we were a hot switch into the aircraft, we reviewed the hot-switch procedures during the brief and discussed all the ORM aspects of the evolution. The only other part of the evolution that was unusual was my assignment to stay behind in the ready room, while the rest of the crew walked to get a DTD (an item we use to load cryptographic codes) from the offgoing crew.

We ate dinner, donned our flight gear, and waited for our ride to recover. Once the plane was on deck, the rest of the crew headed for the flight deck, while

I stayed behind. I was decked out in flight gear, complete with heavy-duty gloves, sleeves rolled down, and, because it was well past sunset, I used a clear visor. I was ready to walk.

Once I received the DTD from the offgoing crew, I was on my way. Instead of heading to the flight deck via the island, I opted to use the “back porch,” a flight-deck-access hatch outboard of ready 7 on the starboard side. This route was a longer walk on the flight deck, but, with no knee-knockers and the recovery complete, all I had to worry about was any aircraft taxiing between cycles.

When I stepped onto the flight deck, I realized our plane was parked in the six-pack with its nose to the foul line. I was just forward of two FA-18s. Both jets apparently were manned and turning because a number of people were around them. Not wanting to fight their exhaust, I chose to go around the front of



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both Hornets. The Hawkeye already had shut down the starboard engine and was taking on fuel, leaving the port engine online.

I assessed the situation and determined I could walk under the starboard wing-butt of the second Hornet and easily remain outside the Hawkeye's propeller-safety chain, so off I went. However, ducking under the starboard wing pylons on the Hornet forced my head down, as well as my situational awareness (SA). I stood up, expecting to continue my walk to the main-entrance hatch. Instead, I found myself face-to-face with a turning propeller, well inside the safety chain. The momentary disorientation caused me to freeze.

The first movement that caught my attention was a maintainer to my right, who was caught offguard by my sudden appearance inside the safety chain. Fortunately, that sight was enough to recalibrate my gyro. I waved him off and quickly backed up to the Hornet. I then ducked

under the wing flaps and continued around the outside of the safety chain to my appointed position for entering the aircraft. The plane captain signaled for me to enter, and the evolution was complete 30 seconds later. The flight was much less eventful.

With more than eight years of E-2 experience and two-and-a-half deployments under my belt, I never had given a second thought to safely completing this hot switch. I had heard complacency briefed at safety stand-downs, read about it in *Approach*, and, as a former fleet-replacement-squadron (FRS) instructor, had preached it to my students many times. What happened to me just goes to show that anybody can fall into this dangerous trap. A week out of the plane is all it took for me. But, now I've got something new to add to my bag of sea stories, not to mention a very important ORM item to brief before future hot switches. 🦅

LCdr. Smith flies with VAW-116.