

Music Please, Maestro

By Lt. Robert Hanvey

It was a good deal hop. I was one of the designated E-2C air-power-demonstration pilots, and the conditions were perfect for sharpening the air-wing-demo program. The airshow went well, the formation separated, and all aircraft made their approach to the Case I overhead pattern for recovery. On the way in, one of the Hornet pilots recommended a Case II approach because a cloud layer had moved in over the carrier, which made the overhead stack a difficult option.

With the adrenaline pumping and each aircrew ready to recover, more than 20 airplanes checked in with marshal, and they simultaneously requested holding instructions; radio chaos resulted. With each communication, more confusion ensued.

“601, marshal on the 190 at 28, angels 13.”

“Marshal, was that for 601 or 603?”

“Correction, 603, marshal 190 at 28, angels 13, expect manual push.”

You get the idea.

As hard as CATCC tried, it was the same confusion for every crew airborne.

The Hawkeye, with its new eight-bladed prop, is a climbing machine and can do 300 knots, but it still takes some time to head out 30 miles and climb to 13,000 feet. About the time we arrived in holding, it was our turn to commence the approach. My copilot acquired the ship at seven miles, and we proceeded visually. Our fellow E-2 was directly in front of us at two to three miles.

As we approached five miles, we saw this wall of water—yes, a wall. About two miles in front of the ship

was a torrential thunderstorm, which as naval-aviation logic would dictate, the ship was driving directly toward.

My copilot joked, “If we just did a straight-in instead of a break, we could land before the rain hits.”

We were about to key the mike and suggest the ship switch to a Case III recovery, fully controlled by carrier-air-traffic-control center (CATCC), when the ship switched everyone. Of course, the 10 aircraft still airborne had to switch back to button 16 for a new controller. Don’t forget, two Hawkeyes still were airborne. The more typical situation is a single Hawkeye during Case III operations.

Start the music, maestro, the Hummer dance begins.

We came around on the first approach, and many of the aircraft called “Clara” on the ball. Great, no reference to glide slope, and some were “Clara lineup.” Even better, you might not even see the boat. We heard some “wave off starboard side” calls from the LSOs—again, generally not a good thing.

We began the approach, and it was ugly. With our windshield wipers (yes, we have windshield wipers, but they are not effective) beating frantically, we encountered updrafts, downdrafts, downpours of rain, no rain, confusing radio calls—you name it. We finally reached three-quarters mile and were told to call the ball.

We called “Clara.”

Paddles, ever vigilant and on the job, responded, “Paddles contact,” and started talking us down.

With our windshield wipers on max, we finally caught sight of the ball and called “Hawkeye ball.” But, we kept losing it. As soon as the wiper would pass, I could see



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the lens clearly for a split second and then would lose it again behind a curtain of water. The ball would be on, then high, and then low, then high, but no movement in between—not good. I added too much power in close and boltered. “Here we go again,” I thought.

My “bucket” was now overflowing and making a mess of the cockpit. We had two very experienced aircraft commanders up front. Both of us had a cruise under our belt, and it was taking all we had to keep the plane flying and our SA at a reasonable level.

About this time, my copilot glanced at the airspeed and noticed we were at 205 knots. He politely pointed at my airspeed indicator, and I immediately reduced power and retracted the flaps. An overspeed of the flaps isn’t the end of the world for the E-2C, but it does require a visual inspection before the next flight. It doesn’t matter if it is 191 knots, or 260 knots, (yes, it has been done before). But, this situation did further reduce my concentration, as I beat up myself for overspeeding the flaps.

We again turned back to land and configured without any problems.

The second approach was just as ugly: gusts up and down, lots of rain, and poor visibility. We finally called the ball at one-half mile. However, in close, I lost the ball and had my co-pilot call “Clara.” They talked us down, we caught a safe 2-wire, and were aboard. The LSOs definitely earned their flight-deck pay that afternoon.

In one flight, we had gone from the best of deals to having to use all our cumulative piloting skills to land.

While our CAPC qualification means we are ready to fly the plane aboard the ship with a guest in the right seat, I rather would not think about how much more challenged I would have been had my copilot not had at least the same level of experience.

We had two very important take-aways from this incident. First, never let down your guard. We had the mindset for a simple, day, Case I recovery. But, as conditions deteriorated rapidly, we found ourselves staring at a wall of water, and we completely were unprepared mentally for such a change. When a change like that happens in flight, it is important to slow down, reassess as a crew (we have that luxury as a multi-aircrew platform), and make good decisions.

We fly Case III at night; there is no procedural difference during the day. However, because it was a day flight, our “day” mindset prevailed. That mindset was my first critical error, and it set me up for the flap overspeed. Fortunately, we only oversped the flaps. It could have been much worse, as my SA was very low, and I might not have seen further complications.

The second take-away has to do with flying the ball. If you can’t see the lens as it should be seen, and if you can’t see its movement, then you can’t see the ball. In the debrief, we had a good discussion about the lens. Since I could see the ball, I didn’t think to call “Clara.” Not seeing its movement was as good as not seeing the ball.

The next time you think you have a good-deal hop, be ready for anything. If conditions change, use all of your training, reevaluate and act appropriately. ✈️

Lt Hanvey flies with VAW-121.