Painted Into a Corner

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By Lt. Jesse M. Reed

I was a nugget on my first sea det with my fleet squadron. We were in our first week of tailored-ships-training availability (TSTA) off the coast of Southern California. In keeping with typical June weather for the area, a consistent overcast hung 1,000 feet over the ocean.

This was my first time at the boat since my initial CQ in the Hornet, just shy of a year earlier. During that CQ, we had faced the same summer overcast conditions, and I felt I had done fairly well. Also, my first couple of traps, just a few nights earlier, had gone well. So, I walked to my jet to CQ on this evening, feeling confident and eager to show my squadronmates I could handle myself around the boat—despite being a nugget.

I launched without incident, copied my marshal instructions, and headed to the stack for some comfort time. After 20 minutes, I pushed on time and commenced my approach. As I hit platform, I switched from marshal to approach and listened to comms for the aircraft in front of me coming down the chute. Paddles called starboard winds on approach, so I filed that information in my brain, as I continued the approach. I listened to my approach frequency as the first aircraft called the ball, and I heard paddles say, "Little power… easy with it… power back on… bolter, bolter, bolter."

The next guy in line, on this frequency, had a similar approach with the same result: a bolter. I thought the burble from the starboard winds was causing a nice little settle, and the guys in front of me were overcompensating with too much power, leading to the bolter. I wouldn't let that happen to me.

Finally, it was my turn. I called the ball and started my pass with a centered ball, purposely keeping my aircraft a little overpowered in anticipation of the inevitable sinkhole at the in-close position—my first mistake in trying to "game" my pass. I continued down, and the ball began to rise, so I tried to chip it down. I didn't want to pull too much power, because I thought the burble would help get me back on glide path. As I crossed the

ramp, however, the ball was parked high on the lens, and paddles gave me the words I had convinced myself I wouldn't hear, "Power back on… bolter, bolter, bolter."

I was frustrated with myself, partly because this was my first bolter in the Hornet. I felt better than this. I silently chastised myself for trying to "game" a pass, then came around the box with a sense of determination to fly a much better pass this time. Because of the multiple waveoffs and bolters from other aircraft, approach continued to vector many aircraft in the bolter-waveoff pattern, besides the aircraft that still were pushing from marshal. Based on my fuel state and the current traffic jam, this pass probably would be my last look at the boat before I had to divert.

Minutes later, it again was my turn to call the ball. This time, I worked to keep my jet at the proper power state. As the ball started to rise just a bit, I told myself, "This is not going to happen again," and I made a power-off correction. However, the correction was much more aggressive than needed, and, unfortunately, it just happened to coincide with the burble. A sick feeling came over me as I watched the ball go from slightly high to the bottom red cell. I went to full power just as paddles called out, "Power, waveoff, waveoff!"

I cleaned up, looked at my gas, and saw I was about 500 pounds over bingo. As I tried to convince all those listening I was calm and collected, I said to approach, "If you can give me a quick hook, I probably can get one more look." CATCC responded by giving me a divert signal, and I immediately felt sheepish, knowing my attempt to appear like I knew what I was doing seemed overzealous, considering the combined experience of all the senior aircrew sitting in CATCC who make these decisions. Upon hearing the signal for divert, I began my bingo profile. Little did I know the fun was just beginning.

As I flew toward North Island, I went through my feet-dry checklist and contacted the appropriate ATC facilities to let them know I was an emergency aircraft. Like many aircrew before me, I had mixed up the three golden rules of aviation: aviate, navigate and communicate. I had applied them in opposite order. While I focused on the quick frequency switches, I failed to do the most important part of my emergency procedure at that moment: Fly a good bingo profile.

I realized I was only 20 miles from the field and still climbing through 20,000 feet. We were working 40-mile bingos from the boat, and I had shot through my altitude of 18,000 feet. I immediately brought the throttles to idle and began to descend. Although I didn't realize it yet,

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the extra time spent at military power, climbing through my profile altitude, was about to become a factor. Once I switched to SoCal approach, things began to get interesting. I checked in and asked about the weather. They reported 1,200 overcast. "Not too bad," I thought, knowing from past experience that North Island had the potential to be much more unfriendly in regards to weather.

While SoCal vectored me at altitude toward North Island, I noticed they practically had me overhead the field, coming from the west, rather then from south of the field to help line up for an approach to runway 36. I was about to ask them what their intentions were—mistake No. 2—when the controller asked me to do a 270-degree left turn, with an aggressive descent to 800 feet. Considering I still was at 16,000 feet, the word aggressive probably was an understatement. Up to this point on the divert, other than feeling frustrated with myself, I did not feel panicked about being an emergency aircraft. We practice procedures in the simulator, and hundreds before me had done it without incident. However, there was a frantic edge to the controller's words that suddenly seemed to infect me with a sense of nervousness, almost as if he knew something I didn't. With this thought, I blindly began to comply with their instructions of an aggressive, descending, 270-degree, left-hand turn, with a solid undercast layer over the city of San Diego staring back at me.

As I descended, approach asked me to continue my descent to 400 feet and to expect vectors for an emergency PAR into North Island. I punched through the goo at 2,000 feet, still in a left hand turn, and about five miles south of the field. I felt uncomfortable with my current situation: wrapped up in a turn at a high rate of descent, IMC with only a few thousand feet between me and the ground, and only a few miles from the approach end of a runway—not a good way to live.

As I turned on final, I dirtied up earlier than I wanted, considering I was trying to conserve as much fuel as possible. But, I needed to slow in a hurry to lose enough altitude to land. I descended through 1,200 feet, and, once again, a sick feeling entered my stomach, because I had not yet broken out of the clouds.

I continued my descent, cursed the inaccurate weather forecast, and finally broke out at 500 feet, only a few miles from the airfield. Much to my surprise, I was not lined up with runway 36 as I expected, but I was offset by about 45 degrees to the right of it. In following the GCA controller's heading directions and boresighting my HUD during the descent, I had not looked down at my navigational display to QA my position relative to the course line I had entered for runway 36. My display, incidentally, showed me well off course. Adding to my state of surprise, my canopy was streaked with precipitation. I hawked on a hard left turn to align myself with the runway, added full power, and simultaneously tried to assess my situation.

I realized the runway probably was wet, and, in conjunction with my carrier-pressurized tires, and the short runway of 8,000 feet, I would need every inch of runway to slow down. I glanced at my fuel and expected to see the NATOPS value our bingo profile puts us on deck with: around 1,500 pounds. Instead, my fuel display showed 1,100 pounds. A lap around the GCA box usually takes about 800 pounds for a Hornet, so I only would have 300 pounds on deck if I had to go around, and that assumed everything went according to plan. With a ceiling of 500 feet, and knowing the pattern altitude at North Island was around 2,000 feet, I thought it would not be smart to go around and remain VMC below the clouds, especially considering my lack of preflight familiarization with the airfield. My fear was to hit a tower I was not aware of, while trying to stay below the ceiling. I decided this pass was my only shot to land.

When I finally lined up with the runway, I already was over the threshold. I dropped the hook, even though I couldn't recall exactly where the short-field gear was located. I touched down a few thousand feet long, and I knew right away this landing was going to be sporty. Whether I actually had touched down before the arresting gear located at 1,800 feet or not, I didn't catch it. I extended the speed brake and got on the binders as hard as I could push with my feet. However, the aircraft barely decelerated. The antiskid was doing its job in preventing a blown tire by not giving me much braking action, but, unfortunately, this left me hurtling down the runway with less and less concrete in front of me.

Passing the 4 board at still more than 100 knots, I told myself there were two options left: Catch the long-field gear, or eject as my plane went off the end of the runway into San Diego Bay. As if reading my mind, tower came up over the radio and said, "Jason 405, be advised… there is no long-field gear rigged."

"I can't believe this is happening," I thought, as I pressed harder on the brakes, as if it would matter. I was willing the aircraft to slow down. The braking action was getting better as I decelerated, but I knew it was not

enough to stop me within the remaining runway. Just as I thought I had exhausted all my options, I saw the blue taxiway lights at the holdshort of runway 18 to my right. Deciding this taxiway would be a better option than going off-road, I jammed down on the high-gain NWS button and slammed down a full boot of right rudder. Surprisingly, the aircraft cornered nicely, and I swerved into the holdshort area. As I veered off the runway, the aircraft lost some of its traction, spun about 180 degrees, and came to a stop, facing the runway.

The only sound was the gentle, comforting hum of the jet—a deceiving sound, considering the sheer terror I just had felt moments ago. It took about 30 seconds before I could collect myself to key the mike and ask tower to send the fire trucks to check my brakes and tires. With my legs shaking, I taxied back to the transient line, crawled out of the jet, and kissed the ground. I didn't have the wherewithal to closely inspect my aircraft.

I would find out the next day, upon inspecting my jet, that I had shredded several layers of tread off the left main tire because of my "hockey stop." The jet obviously was down. The exact words of an AM1 working in a nearby hangar, who I had managed to track down hoping to get a second opinion from were, "Sir, I would not even go near that tire if I were you."

Fortunately, for me, I was able to arrange for a maintenance rescue team to come down from MCAS Miramar and change my tire and service the jet, enabling me to fly out to the boat later that afternoon.

Although a terrifying experience, I learned some important lessons this night. The first one applies to all those ball fliers out there: Never try to game a pass at the boat. Fly the ball proactively, and an inconvenience like the burble takes care of itself. Closely related to this lesson is aviating first. Too often, when we become task-saturated, we fail to do this most important step. Remember, a comm call isn't going to keep a plane from nosing into the dirt or, in my case, running lower on fuel because of a sloppy bingo profile.

The next lesson from this night was that I let an approach controller, in essence, become the pilot-in-command of my aircraft. As the pilot of an emergency aircraft, I should have been telling him what my intentions were, not asking what his intentions were for me. While a controller may have an emergency pilot's best interest in mind, it doesn't mean he or she knows the best way to get your aircraft safely on deck. On this night, I let ATC paint me into a corner. On any other night, it might not have been a big deal, but, when coupled with the other unforeseen factors, such as inaccurate weather forecast, arresting gear that is not NOTAM'd out of service, and an unfamiliar field, it turned into a very scary situation.

Another lesson to take away from this incident concerns airfield familiarization. Had I been more familiar with the airfield, I might not have made the decision that I had one chance to land. Examination of the airport diagram for NAS North Island shows there are, in fact, no towers or obstructions at 500 feet to the west of runway 36. The only obstruction is Point Loma on the other side of the bay, which would have been fairly easy to avoid, especially with all the tools Hornet pilots have in their cockpits, such as a digital map. Another quick look at the diagram shows the minimum safe altitude to the west is 1,600 feet, so, if I felt like I had lost track of my position relation to terrain, I at least could have climbed to that altitude to keep clear.

My decision to adhere to the Hornet rule-of-thumb for 800 pounds of gas for a GCA box was not necessarily a smart one, especially when stacked against the possibility of an extremely dangerous landing. Looking back, a better game plan might have been to go around, climb to 1,600 feet, turn to the west, and initialize my self-contained GCA. The gas numbers we use are conservative, and I easily could have used less than 800 pounds of gas if I had wanted to. The bottom line is, if I am piloting an emergency aircraft, I should be able to put my jet wherever I want, and it's ATCs' responsibility to keep other aircraft out of my way.

In an extremis condition, come up with a game plan to get your aircraft on deck in a manner that is comfortable for you, and relay that game plan to your controllers. Base your plan from sound headwork, which includes preflight planning. Don't wait for someone else to create a plan for you that is unworkable. I only wish it hadn't taken a close call for me to take this lesson to heart.

Lt. Reed flies with VFA-147.

The vast majority of our aircraft damage and losses are not the result of enemy actions, but from our actions, which we identify as the Blue Threat. We are our worst enemy when it comes to causing mishaps. This article is an example of just such a mishap, a Hornet was damaged as a result of our actions, not the enemies. Two recent issues of Approach *(September-October 2006 and November-December 2006) have discussed the Blue-Threat topic, they are available online at: http://www.safetycenter.navy.mil/media/approach/default.htm.—Ed.*