



# Close Call With a Closing Canopy

*by LCdr. John Elstad*

It was an uncharacteristically cold and rainy day as I manned up for my first Operation Southern Watch (OSW) flight since our arrival in the Persian Gulf. I had that touch of anxiety you get anytime you do something you have not done in a while. It had been more than a year and a half since I had served my last sentence in the hot box.

The weather had been cloudy, and sure enough, a steady rainfall was coming down as we hit the flight deck to man-up. We headed for our Prowler. Our flight-deck chief gave us a heads-up that the flight deck had just lost power. We would have to wait a little while before manning the aircraft. I did a preflight

and found myself a nice dry spot underneath the starboard wing, which kept me out of the rain. As launch time approached and still with no power, our crew started to worry about getting behind on our startup sequence. I discussed it with my pilot, and we decided to open the canopies, jump in, and then quickly shut the canopies to keep the rain out of the cockpit and its delicate electrical systems.

I waited on the starboard side of the jet while the plane captain opened the forward and aft canopies. As soon as they were up, I quickly climbed up the starboard boarding ladder, stepped onto the ECMO 1 boarding platform, and started to preflight the ejection

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seat. I had just started pulling pins when I noticed pressure being exerted on my back. I thought someone was slapping me on the backside to get my attention. I looked back and noticed the canopy closing on me. I immediately tried to back out of the way, but part of my SV-2 was caught on the canopy rail, and I couldn't get out. As the pressure increased, my mind raced. My instincts took over as I tried one more lunge to get out of the way. My SV-2 broke free, and I entered the freefall part of my adventure.

Off balance, I fell off the boarding platform in one ungraceful motion. The EA-6B boarding platform is seven to eight feet above the deck. This may not seem like much, but it makes for a rough landing when your cushion on the bottom end is steel deck plate.

I hit the flight deck at an angle close to what we practice doing parachute-landing falls. I was stunned and stayed in a prone position for a minute or so. I gradually got my wits about me and started moving various parts of my body to make sure nothing was broken. Cautiously standing up, it seemed like all my parts were working as advertised. I slowly started to walk around, and other than having pain in my right leg and elbow, I was pleased to find I was in decent shape. A group of squadron maintenance and flight-deck personnel had arrived at the scene and were checking on my well-being. I said I was OK.

My swan dive had resulted from a miscommunication between the plane captain, on the port side of the aircraft, and the flight-deck chief, on the starboard side. The plane captain had asked the chief, using sign language, whether the boarding ladder was clear so he could close the canopies. He got what he mistakenly thought was the all-clear signal and proceeded to shut the canopy, unable to see my side of the jet.

I felt lucky to come out of this incident with nothing more than a few bumps and bruises. I could have been crushed by the canopy, and the fall to the flight deck easily could have produced a few broken bones. The fact that I had on my flight gear and helmet cushioned the fall. Our jet was parked right next to elevator 1, which was up at the time. I landed on it, and I can only imagine what would have happened had it been lowered.

After chatting with our flight-deck mechs, I found out that someone had decided to close the canopy shortly after it was opened, which is why my pilot never climbed up his side. The plane captain had just earned his qual and was shook up over the whole deal. He apologized to me. I told him everything was OK and made sure the lessons learned were clear.

When aircrew enter the jet, the first thing they should do is check to make sure the internal canopy handles are pinned. All I needed to do was take a quick glance at the canopy handle to make sure it was pinned, but I was too hurried and busy.

The external handles for operating the canopies on the EA-6B are on the port side of the jet. You cannot see if anyone is on the starboard side unless you walk over there to check or have another person positioned on the starboard side to confirm it is safe to close the canopy. Any non-verbal communications must be standard and unambiguous.

When opening canopies, plane captains are trained to immediately pin the canopy handles on the inside of the jet. This way the canopies remain open even if you try to close them using the external handles.

Being in a hurry on the flight deck is a good way to get yourself killed. Do things right the first time, and you'll minimize your risks in a very risky business. 

LCdr. Elstad flies with VAQ-130.