

Never Again

By Ltjg. Case Vernon

We were a few weeks into our cruise, and I was enjoying life as a nugget pilot with VFA-147. Carrier Air Wing Nine and the USS *John C. Stennis* battle group were crossing the Pacific to relieve a carrier in the Arabian Sea, in support of Operation Enduring Freedom. We deployed two months ahead of schedule, and everyone was excited about the upcoming combat operations.

I was scheduled for a night sortie to remain night-current onboard the boat. I was relaxed about the flight—not too much preparation or study for this hop. “Just go out and bag a night trap,” I told myself.

I went through my normal rituals: Suit up, grab the weight chit, and go up to flight deck control to see where my jet was parked. Aircraft 406 was parked in the six-

pack, which I thought was great because the floodlights from the island would shine down to help me preflight and strap in. I did the standard walk-around and everything looked good. About this time, I could hear the distinct sound of other Hornets starting. I looked at my watch and realized I had only 20 minutes until launch time. I cursed myself for being late.

The plane captain used the electrical canopy-actuate switch inside the ground-power-receptacle door to open the canopy—standard procedure. I climbed the ladder and started my ejection seat and cockpit preflight, then strapped in and started the normal startup checklist. It was warm outside—about 80 degrees Fahrenheit, so I decided to leave the canopy up for start until the ECS cooled down and had good flow. Once I had both engines online, I became distracted with some FCS Xs and BLIN



codes. I had a troubleshooter hook up, and I read the problems over the ICS. By this time, other aircraft were taxiing to the waist catapults in front of me, and I was nervous about making the launch.

We finally sorted out the FCS gripes, and the IBIT passed. In this confusion, I still had not lowered my canopy. As the PC gave me the “four down” signal, I remembered to lower the canopy. I held the switch in the down position, but to my surprise, nothing happened. The canopy didn’t move an inch. I cycled the switch up and down—still nothing.

I signaled for the troubleshooter again, and he hooked up for the second time.

“What’s up sir?” he asked.

I explained the canopy would not move when I held down the switch. He checked the circuit breaker and told me it was OK. Next, I shut down the port engine so he could climb up and take a look for himself. By this time, the first aircraft was in tension on cat 4, and I was thinking to myself, “I’m going to miss this launch because my stinking canopy won’t close.”

After the troubleshooter tinkered with the switch, he yelled to me over the noise that he manually would crank down the canopy a little ways, and then I could take over with the handle stowed in the cockpit. I thought this was fine; let’s just hurry up already.

He started cranking, and the canopy started to move down. In the cockpit, I wrestled with the handle and finally dislodged it from its clamp. I took over cranking from the ‘shooter and the canopy slowly came down to the rail. It started moving forward, as it should. I cranked until the canopy caution light went out on the left DDI and then cranked it a few more times until it stopped. I figured that was good enough—the light was out, and the handle wouldn’t crank any farther. I stowed the handle and gave a thumbs up to the yellowshirt, who was waiting impatiently in front of my jet.

I was quickly broken down and taxied to cat 4 for launch. I went through my checklist bottom to top and went to military upon the “take tension” signal. I gave a good wipeout of the controls and double-checked my flaps-half, trim and radar altimeter set. I turned on my external lights and grabbed the towel rack with my right hand. Ahead of me was your standard, scary night sky, with no horizon whatever.

At the end of the stroke, I felt a thump, and a little wind rushed into the cockpit. It was followed closely

by the infamous “deedle-deedle.” All I was concerned with was rotating and flying away from the water. I already had selected max power down the stroke, so I set 10-degrees-pitch attitude and looked for a positive VSI. I raised the gear and flaps, and after passing 1,000 feet, I punched out the master-caution light and looked down to see canopy, voice/aur, and CNI cautions.

I hesitantly looked to see if the canopy was still there. It was, but it had slid back about four inches—as if you had closed it normally until it hit the canopy rails and then stopped. At that moment, I heard a loud beeping tone in my headset—like an ELT beacon sounding. I pulled out the comm 1 knob to deselect guard, but nothing came up in the UFC scratchpad. I tried comm 2—nothing. It was as if the radios had frozen. The situation had gone from bad to worse, and I was frustrated.

I decided the worst problem was the open canopy, so I lowered my seat all the way, and slowed to 200 knots. I decided to put down half-flaps too, and slow to 150 knots. I climbed to 8,000 feet, set the autopilot, and retrieved the PCL from my helmet bag. I had departure control on comm 1, so I tried calling them a few times. Between the wind noise and the ELT going off, I couldn’t hear a reply. I had plenty of fuel—13,500 pounds to work with, which was at least an hour’s worth at that altitude and power setting.

I circled 15 miles from mother, and read about the other two cautions. Interestingly enough—both cautions said the same thing: 1. Check BIT page. If CSC

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wrong direction?”

MUX failure—2. Refer to CSC MUX failure. So I pulled up the BIT page on the right DDI and, sure enough, CSC MUX fail was staring me in the face. I found the page in the PCL and learned there aren’t any steps to take—you’re stuck with what you’ve got. My radar altimeter, voice alerts, radio control, TACAN, and some other systems were history. The PCL did say, however, I could use the UFC backup to select radio channels.

Simultaneously, I made a radio call every other minute or so—declaring an emergency and stating my position on departure frequency. I switched on the manual-guard-select switch on the left console and tried to broadcast. After a few tries, with the ELT still going off, I faintly heard “Ghost,” one of our E-2Cs, roger up one of my calls for help. They surely would relay my troubles to the ship and send someone to join on me. I hadn’t tried the UFC backup on the radios yet.

This whole process had taken about 15 minutes, but it felt like an hour. I burned circles in the night sky and waited for someone to join. Next, I decided to try closing the canopy with the crank handle. I wrestled the darn thing out again and carefully connected it to the knob.

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Then it dawned on me, “What if I crank in the wrong direction?” I couldn’t remember—clockwise or counter-clockwise? If I guessed wrong, the thing might blow off completely, and then I’d really have a problem. I put my eyes right up to the canopy rail and started cranking at a snail’s pace. The canopy inched forward. A strange voice in my head said, “You chose wisely.” I managed to get the canopy an inch or so forward, but that’s all. “Better than nothing,” I thought to myself.

About that time, I saw some red strobe lights down my left-wing line. Thank God, one of my Hornet buddies had arrived to take me back to the ship. Then the ELT beacon stopped. That was good news. Now I could communicate easily with Rhino, a Marine aviator from VMFA-314. I passed him the lead, and he told me he’d take me down for the CV-1 approach. That sounded good to me; I just wanted to trap and get out of this thing. We descended and set up for a straight-in approach. With no TACAN and no ACLS, I was glad to be flying parade. I had switched up the manual

ILS on the left console as well, but I never got needles. Oh well, at least we weren’t IMC. I dumped to landing weight and tried to psyche myself up for the approach and landing. Rhino kissed me off and told me he’d be at my 10 o’clock if I boltered or waved off.

The ball was right in the center when I called it, and I flew it down. I started to go high and tried to chip away at it. “Not enough,” I thought, so I eased off more power. Just then, it seemed to take the express elevator down. I came on with MIL as paddles called for power. I knew I had overcorrected when paddles followed with, “Easy with it.” The ball went back up the lens—right to the top as I was over the steel.

As I touched down, I hoped the canopy would stay put. I didn’t feel the hook engage.

“Bolter, bolter,” paddles said. I knew it already. The canopy seemed fine as I climbed away, and I raised the gear and went to half flaps. I saw Rhino right where

he said he’d be, and I joined quickly. “No problem,” he said, “just take it easy.” He led me around, and we set up again. This time, he dropped me off at a mile, so I could start flying the ball a little earlier. This pass was much better. A little high all the way to an OK 3-wire. I breathed a big sigh of relief as I taxied clear of the landing area. Boy, was I glad to hear my engines spool down!

Later, I went through the story with most of the guys in the ready room, and one said, “Didn’t you read that message about a guy who manually cranked down his canopy and ended up losing it? He couldn’t fly a safe approach because of the wind blast and having to hunker down in the cockpit. He ended up doing an ACLS mode one.”

“No,” I said glumly, I had never read that message. I was fortunate. I wouldn’t have been able to do a mode one with the CSC failure. The adage held true; If it doesn’t feel right, it probably isn’t. As I went to bed that night, all I could think to myself was, “Never again.” 

Ltjg. Vernon flies with VFA-147.