

# Dying to get the



By Cdr. Charles Luttrell

We had a beautiful day in the Northwest, the first day of the annual “three-day summer season.” The typical summer fog had formed on the water at the end of the runway, teasing us all day long, moving in and out and occasionally making the field 0/0. Aircraft had been launching, and some were diverting upon return to home base as Mother Nature kept toying with us. I was completing my Cat II syllabus NATOPS check with a senior lieutenant, who was wrapping up his FRS instructor tour. Between us, we had 15 years of flying experience that should have helped us to make the right decisions, but all that experience didn’t help.

The Prowler community was knee-deep in the wing-fatigue issue at the time, and fly-able aircraft were at a premium. The FRS was under incredible pressure to meet production requirements, not only of the carrier Navy but also to train 100 additional aircrew to stand up four new squadrons to deploy with U.S.

Air Force Expeditionary Wings. As a Cat II aircrew, I would stay low on the priority list until just before transferring to the fleet. I had completed all of my syllabus events on a cross-country trip, except for my NATOPS check. During my last week at the FRS, I had been scheduled three times for a final flight, but I was canceled each time for aircraft availability. Friday arrived, and, once again, I was scheduled for my check flight. I had to get the “X” to transfer on Monday. Up early in the morning, I looked outside my dining room window to be greeted by 0/0 conditions.

I arrived at the squadron and briefed the flight. We peeked outside and could see the runway intersection—the day was looking up. We called metro to check on the low-level-route weather, and it was good. Today would be my day to finish.

As we started to walk, the phone rang, and we were told our jet was down. After talking to the ODO, he said we should wait for

the second event because I now was high-pri because of my transfer. The situation started to look good again.

We called range scheduling to update our route, but we were unable to get a new low-level time. We changed the flight to an instrument round robin and rebriefed for a 1030 go. At 0945, the ODO said no chance; a Cat IV just had taken the No. 1 priority for a jet. I decided to hang around the ready room for either an opportunity to fly or happy hour. Fortunately, I squeezed myself into a one-hour sortie.

Then we caught a break; the fog rolled back out, and the runways cleared past the intersection. Once again, we briefed the flight and walked to the jet at 1430. The start was delayed because of mechanical problems, but we stayed with it—we had to get the “X.”

As we started to taxi, ground control changed the duty runway to 31, which had fog sitting at the departure end. Takeoff was normal, and we went into the goo just past the intersection. Once above 400 feet, the sky was clear as far as the eye could see. Our flight was uneventful, and, upon our return, the duty runway had changed to 13. When we checked in, weather reported the ceiling at 100 feet, with one-quarter-mile visibility. As we approached from the south, we could see the first 5,000 feet of runways 31 and 25. But, in their infinite wisdom and pursuit of noise abatement (or maybe they just needed some controller training), tower wanted people to land on the fogged-in end of the field. The pilot and I talked it over, and I asked to land on runway 25. The controller said it was unavailable because of calm wind and noise abatement. After a little more discussion, we decided to shoot the approach to 13, and, if we waved off, we would land on 25.

Approach called and gave us vectors to the north for a PAR (ACLS was down). As we passed the field, the fog bank had rolled in to cover the first 2,000 feet of runway, with the top of the fog at about 400 feet. We took our last turn to the south and began our descent. We were

frustrated shooting the approach to a runway where we couldn't see the threshold, but we clearly could see the departure end. The pilot and I kept discussing how dumb this was; yet, we continued down the chute.

We entered the goo at 400 feet. It was thick, and it got pretty dark in the plane. At 250 feet AGL, I started to see water but couldn't see anything ahead of us. I relayed that info to the pilot, and we kept pushing. He said he also occasionally could see the water. Passing 200 feet, I caught a glimpse of the ground as we continued down. At 100 feet, we broke out, and, to my amazement, I suddenly realized we would not make the runway. I called for power about the same time I heard the pilot say, “Oh sh##!” and the power came on.

We made it past the threshold and cleared the lighting. Neither of us said another word until we stopped in the hot pits. We just looked at each other and said, “Boy, was that stupid!”

We had calm winds and two perfectly clear approach ends to choose from, and we decided to let the controllers put us into an actual instrument approach that almost cost us a limited-edition Prowler. I look back on that day and wish I had been much more aggressive in getting the controllers to change the runway. I was preoccupied with not just getting the “X” but getting the plane on deck for the next go—so the FRS could make some progress on a day they had missed 10 of 12 sorties.

As I reflect on the events of that day, I remember the back of an *Approach* magazine poster showing a scorch mark in the shape of an “X” on the ground. I don't remember the exact saying, but I can paraphrase it, “Don't die trying to get the X.” When I first saw that poster, I would laugh smugly and say to myself, “That never would happen to me.” Well, on that Friday afternoon, I was within a few feet of being that smoking hole in the ground. The pressure to get the “X” was self-induced. My pilot and I knew what we were doing was ridiculous; yet, we almost “died to get the ‘X.’” 

Cdr. Luttrell flies with VAQ-139.