

Not SO Fast

By Lt. Jon Vanbragt

Carrier qualifying before my first nugget cruise was supposed to be a good time: Go out to the boat (always an adventure), get more traps, and finally feel a little more like a fleet aviator and a little less like an FRS student. However, the situation I found myself in during my night CQ turned out to be a whole lot less than a pleasurable experience.

The fun began in the bolter, waveoff pattern. After one discontinued approach and a trip around the pattern, I was ready to get on deck. Bull's-eye and needles were both "on and on" at three-quarters of a mile, when my WSO made the ball call. Just like paddles had briefed me, I kept the ball on the happy side of the lens, proactively flying it to the best of my ability. My reward was a 3-wire, and I went to mil power. That's when life got a little more complicated.

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Photo by PH3 Sammy Dallal. Modified.

On the roll out, I felt the familiar tug of the hook catching the cross-deck pendant, as the arresting-gear motors dissipated my jet's energy. Approaching the edge of the angle, I felt a jerk and then another. Even with my very limited experience around the boat—this was my 10th night trap—I knew something was wrong. I watched in horror as the edge of the angle passed beneath the nose of my aircraft.

I screamed, "Eject!"

I grabbed the handle with my right hand, but, fortunately, my WSO had beaten me to the punch; then there was a fireball.

Next thing I remember was a riser hitting the side of my helmet. I was disoriented and thought I was upside down. It made no sense to me to see an inflated parachute in what I believed was the space below me. Just as I realized I was right side up, I hit the water. Because of the attitude of the jet during ejection, I had received only a single swing in the chute—almost the worst-case scenario taught at water survival.

More chaos ensued as my horse collar auto-inflated. I found myself floating in the water, being dragged by my chute. I reached up as the SEAWARS (sea-water-activated-release system) auto ejected one of the two risers, but I then noticed what I assessed to be a bigger problem: The aircraft carrier was headed right for me.

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to watch the angle pass me for the second time that night. The carrier surprisingly was quiet as it pushed through the water a mere 10 feet away. I heard none of the familiar noises of the flight deck, just the splashing of waves. As I approached the aft end of the ship, I started to get sucked into the wake. I ended up almost directly behind the carrier. The stage now was set for my third surprise of the night.

My left Koch fitting, which I completely had forgotten about, still was connected to my harness. Unfortunately, my SEAWARS had not activated on that fitting, and I was about to find out firsthand just how strong the pull of a parachute could be. As mine got caught in the wake of the carrier, I was tugged underwater with a force I couldn't resist. Frantically, I pawed at the Koch

fitting, trying to overcome the force pulling me below. I was able to free myself and float to the surface after having been pulled about 10 feet underwater. When I reached the surface, I realized one of my options from the IROK (inspect/inflate, release raft, options/oxygen, and Koch fittings) procedure just had saved my life. I had not yet removed my mask, and oxygen from the emergency bottle in my seat pan still was being pumped to me while I was underwater.

As I sat in the wake of the ship, wondering what just had happened to put me in the ocean, I started to look around for the SAR assets. To my left, I viewed one of the saddest sights of my life: The tails from my FA-18F still were protruding from the ocean.

“Well,” I thought, “better try to get rescued.”

The first thing I did was to try to free my raft from my seat pan. After unsuccessfully fumbling with the box, I decided to remove it; I again was unsuccessful. I couldn't free the fittings wedged between my body and personal flotation.

Giving up on the raft, I began to scour my survival vest for the items I thought were important for my current situation. I reached into my left pocket and felt what seemed like my strobe light. I couldn't see a thing in the dark, and, with my gloves on, I was fumbling even more. I pulled out the object and got exactly what I didn't need just then: my water bottle. After a few curse words, I let the bottle go and went back into my left pocket.

Next, I pulled out my flashlight. Twisting the top, it flickered to life. Light, oh yeah! I flashed that light at everything I could see. I flashed it at the helos, the plane guard, the carrier, and even my helmet to get the SAR crew's attention. I finally concluded the light alone was not enough, and I decided to go for the other pocket.

Reaching into my right pocket, I felt around some more and found something I knew would come in handy: the day-night flare. During my search in the right pocket, though, I dropped my light and again was without illumination. Pulling out the nearest end of the flare, I held it away from me and popped the actuator. I was greeted with a large spark, which made me very happy—until a huge cloud of smoke emerged. I had popped the wrong end! Once again, after mumbling a few expletives, I turned the flare around and actuated the night end, waving it at the nearest SAR helicopter.

As the flare burned out, I went back into my left

pocket to try to find the pencil flares. Instead, I got my arm wrapped in the cord that secured the light to my vest. I noticed the light still was on in the water below me and pulled up the cord to retrieve my light. As the helo began to circle over me, I flashed my helmet light again to help them see me.

The SAR helo dropped off a rescue swimmer, who very calmly came over to me, asked me if I was all right, and began to clear any lines that may have been wrapped around me. I was very impressed with his patience and thoroughness, as I probably was much more anxious than he to get aboard his helo. Once sure I was clear, he attached my D-ring to the helo hoist, and I was on board the SH-60 before I knew it. My WSO already had been picked up by the helo crew and had no injuries from his ejection.

I learned many things that evening. The ejection, while intense and overwhelming, was just the very beginning of the survival process. I'm thankful I wore my dry suit in the cold water. I'm fortunate I had not removed my mask immediately on water entry and that I had gotten the second Koch fitting off while in the ship's wake.

I also did many things poorly that evening. I should have concentrated on removing that second Koch fitting immediately after water entry. While the SEAWARS is designed to operate automatically, I should have been ready to free myself from my chute. When I was in the wake, I should have taken a few deep breaths, relaxed and removed my gloves. The added dexterity greatly would have helped me in locating and actuating my survival gear. If my hands had gotten cold, I could have put the gloves back on. **I should have been more familiar** with the location of my survival gear. Five minutes more in the PR shop to refamiliarize myself with the location of survival items in my vest could have saved me precious moments of fumbling while in the water.

It's easy to say you know where your gear is, and it won't be a problem to find a certain item, but, with the **disorientation** and shock of ejection, I found even the simplest of tasks was very difficult. Just because you can find the gear when you're suiting up does not mean it will be readily available while you float in the water on a dark night.

Finally, I never should have put my wallet and my I-pod in my helmet bag. It's bad enough to eject, but losing those items added insult to injury. 🦋

Lt. Vanbragt flies with VFA-102.