

A Light Show at Sea



By PR1(AW) Jeremy Smith, VAQ-132

We finished our JTFEX work-up and sailed east to start our upcoming deployment. The carrier's CO just had made an announcement on the 1MC. You hear him so often that you start not paying full attention to what he's saying, but tonight's message caught my attention. I heard him say, "This is the captain. We just made our final recoveries of flight operations, and now we are ready to go on deployment. We are going to have an ice-cream social. I want you to take a break and meet three new people tonight. Stick out your chest and be proud that you're serving on the JFK. Captain out." He might have said more, but I had heard what I wanted to hear.

Moments later, our squadron XO and another officer returned from preflighting the alert EA-6B aircraft. When they entered the PR shop, they told us about a thunderstorm on the horizon. Have you ever watched a lightning storm from the flight deck of an aircraft carrier at sea? It is one of the most incredible things you ever will see. Having been in the Navy nearly 11 years,

I had experienced some thunderstorms at sea, some near and some distant. The close ones can frighten you, but the ones that are at a distance are worth taking the time to go up on the flight deck to watch.

I looked over at my new airman, knowing he never had seen a thunderstorm at sea and said, "Let's go—you can't miss this." We grabbed our float coats and cranials and headed up to the flight deck. It was a perfect night: dark as can be, with this amazing lightning storm approximately five miles away. You could see the stars above and the Milky Way, with the lightning flashing off in the distance.

It was so dark I couldn't see the ladder or the catwalk, so I carried my cranial in my hand because it still had the dark visor attached. I was thankful someone had a flashlight and lit up the ladderwell so we safely could reach the flight deck. On the patio of the flight deck, the area near the landing area officer, I looked around to see what direction the thunderstorm was coming from. It was up forward, toward the angle. I

could see the lights from an aircraft overhead. Since we were off the coast of Florida, I assumed it was an airliner passing. I told the airman that the best place to see the storm would be at the top of the angle. With our cranials in hand and me leading the way, we set off toward the 4-wire, unknowingly walking into the landing area aft of the 1-wire.

The airman asked me, "What's that light behind us?"

I told him, "That's the mast of the plane-guard ship that follows us from time to time."

He came right back with, "No, not that light—that light!" pointing at a row of green and red lights next to the LSO platform.

Just then, I heard the air boss yell out on the 5-MC, "Clear the landing area; we're recovering aircraft!"

The "Oh s#@*!" factor kicked in. I ran outboard toward the foul line, donning my cranial as fast as I could and heading back toward my shop with my

"No," they corrected me; "the captain said we were recovering the last of our aircraft."

My first in a long list of mistakes was that I didn't listen closely to what the captain had said; I had gotten into the habit of tuning him out. Second, I didn't take the proper PPE and gear with me to the flight deck. I didn't have a flashlight, and, since I work on day check, I still had a dark lens in my goggles. I barely could see the ladders on the catwalk or the obstacles around me, so I didn't wear my cranial. My third and biggest mistake was I didn't pay attention to what was happening on the flight deck. I walked into the landing area while flight operations were going on. No more than 20 seconds later, an FA-18 trapped and caught the 1-wire. I had no idea just how far into the landing area we had gone, but what I did know was I could have gotten both of us killed.

The following day, I returned to the flight deck

well before flight operations were called away. I wanted to reenact the night before, just to see how far we were into the landing area or to see if we had fouled the deck. I discovered we were at least 20 feet into the landing area. If nobody had seen us, we surely would have been killed. Float coats have minimal reflection tape on them, but the cranial provides twice as much reflective material. If we had been

wearing our cranials and the proper PPE, we might have been noticed much faster.

I learned several lessons. Never assume that flight operations are over. Don't enter the flight deck without proper PPE. Know your surroundings. Have a light with you when going on deck at night. Even though the person with you might have more time and experience doesn't mean you don't have to look out for yourself. Awareness is the key to survival. ✨

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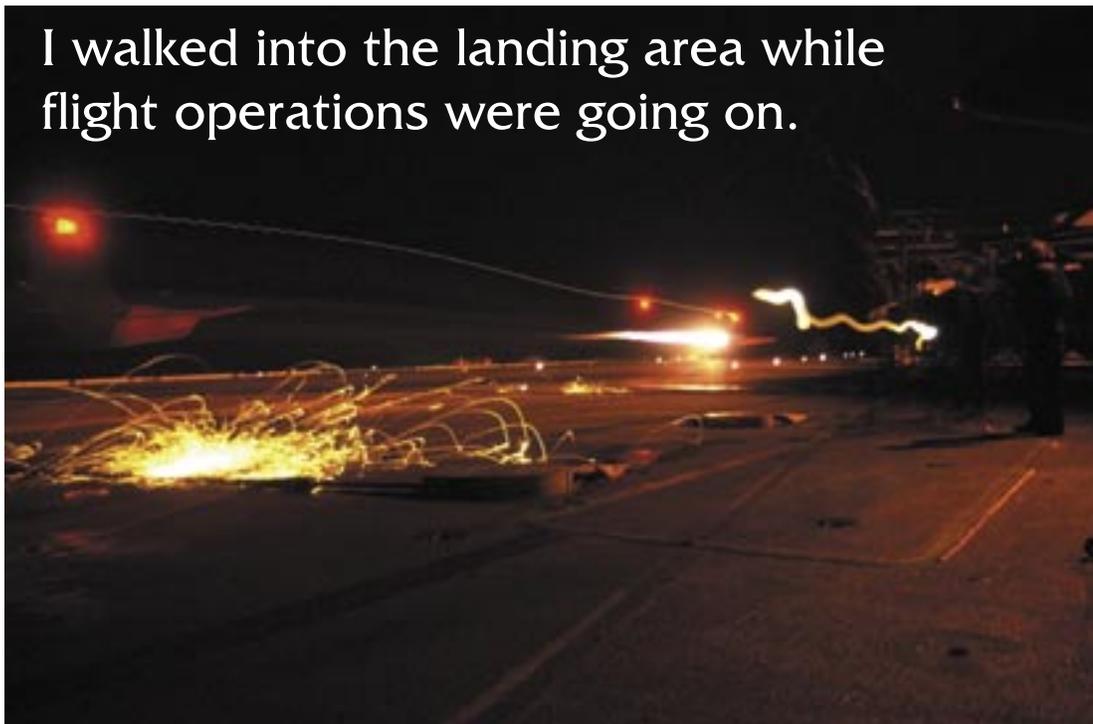


Photo by PH3 John E. Woods

airman in tow. Once we returned to the shop and the adrenaline started to subside, I was able to think about what just had happened. My first thought was my airman and I could have been killed because of my actions. I also could have caused damage or loss of an aircraft. What was I thinking? I knew always to check my surroundings on the flight deck, but complacency almost killed me and another person. I talked with the guys in the shop about what had happened. I told them I'd swear I had heard the captain say we just had recovered our last aircraft.