

Bingo?

By Lt. Mike Mrstik

I've always been afraid of the dark. In my limited time as an S-3 driver, I have come to believe the Navy would have a lot fewer double-anchor types if they knew or could feel the terror a new pilot feels during his last four seconds of ball-flying on a night approach.

I just had finished carrier qualifications with the FRS and had joined my squadron underway on the first week of work-ups. I had not shined during FRS CQ, but I told myself this would be a great opportunity to go out and show I could hang with the big boys. During my first week, I was confined to the day page, and life was good. It wasn't until the second week that my name first appeared on the night page.

The schedule writers had paired me with a senior NFO for a double-cycle SSC mission. The SSC was uneventful, and we logged almost three hours before we assumed duty as recovery tanker. Hawking the recovery was not something we practiced at the FRS, and I quickly found myself hanging on the stabs trying to keep up. Maneuvering in and out of clouds to set hawks, I did the best I could to stay focused and avoid vertigo. In an airwing comprised mostly of nuggets, several jets boltered, and, before long, I had my first few "saves." The glory, however, was short-lived. Soon it was my turn to come down the chute.

"Bolter, bolter, bolter!" After the third bolter and approaching the mission's fourth hour, I decided it might be a good idea to let my rightseater know I had started to experience vertigo. My senses and instruments were not agreeing in the least.

On my fourth pass, like the previous three, I floated the ball off the top of the lens. After I had lifted, CATCC told me to check in with marshal, and they would recover me after the next launch. I looked forward to the break, so I could recover from my case of vertigo. I also assured myself the next recovery would go more smoothly. Fortunately, the S-3 uses gas like a Geo Metro, and I was sure we would have plenty to get aboard without tanking. "What S-3 pilot ever has had to sweat gas?" I

thought. Besides, I was sure we would get aboard on the next pass.

The marshal stack was IFR, and my vertigo continued. By the time we had commenced our next approach, I realized I still couldn't tell up from down and asked my COTAC to call vertigo on the ball. He responded by telling me that he also had vertigo. I concentrated hard on flying instruments and transitioning to the ball for my next three passes. My COTAC gave the best backup he could, but after four hours in the soup, I think his brain was as uncaged as mine.

Even an S-3 can't fly forever, and before I knew it, we had reached bingo. Despite our bingo state, the boat signaled us to tank. We reiterated our fuel state and asked the boat to confirm "Tank," which they did.

Although the hawk was well set, my join-up was not expeditious. When we reached 400 pounds below bingo, my COTAC finally declared bingo and told the boat we would be diverting.

After a quick fuel calculation, we realized it would be close. We would be landing with less than the 1,000-pound reserve included in the bingo profile. As a precaution, we donned our oxygen masks and prepared for a controlled ejection. As we approached North Island, both low-fuel lights illuminated—we had less than 800 pounds of fuel remaining. We held the gear and flaps until short final and took a short-field arrestment.

Looking back at the incident, I know I had hesitated to declare bingo and divert. I should have swallowed my pride and immediately diverted.

Bingo is an emergency and diverting when you reach that fuel state is a requirement, not an option. The responsibility to be assertive in making this decision rests with the aircrew on board, and nothing should change their mind. Delaying this decision, combined with unsuccessful tanking attempts, could have resulted in ejection, the loss of our aircraft, and, possibly, its crew. 🛩️

Lt. Mrstik flies with VS-29.