Living on

By Lt. Joe Goodman

The flight was your standard man-up for a good-deal night trap. My Hornet was parked on the four row, waiting for a yellowshirt so I could taxi to the cat. It was a humid night, and the temperature must have hit the dew point because fog hit the canopy right after engine starts. The fog made it nearly impossible to see outside, much less see the taxi director. I turned on the canopy-rain removal, which cleared the front part of the canopy enough to taxi.

The yellowshirt broke me down and began to taxi me to the stern, toward the waist cats. I had no peripheral vision because of the fog on the canopy, so I slowly taxied. The deck was moving because of the rough seas; the jet would slow going uphill, then speed up as it rolled downhill.

Standard procedure was to taxi aft, over the 4-wire, take a hard right to taxi between the 3- and 4-wires, then turn right onto cat 4. I took the initial right turn after the 4-wire and had to add power because the deck's port side had risen in a swell. I could feel the jet accelerate, so I came off the power, but the jet kept moving faster than normal. I applied full brakes, but the jet still did not slow.

To compound my problem, the area behind cats 3 and 4 was slick from oil and hydraulic fluid that had soaked into the nonskid. The jet continued to accelerate so quickly, even with the brakes locked, the yellowshirt directing me in front of the jet jumped out of the way. I applied full right nosewheel steering to clear a parked Tomcat on my left, while I tried to keep the nosewheel away from the quickly approaching scupper.

Time seemed to slow down. I didn't know

the Edge

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what speed was needed for the nosewheel to hop over the scupper and put me into the water. All our training had stressed that as soon as the nosegear goes over the scupper, you're out of the ejection envelope.

I planned to give the nosegear one thud of a chance to stop me, then I would go. I had my right hand on the ejection handle as I approached the edge. The one thud stopped the jet and left me stuck against the scupper, hanging over the water. The nosegear slightly was behind the pilot's ejection seat. On my left side, I had missed hitting the Tomcat by six inches.

The airboss came over the radio and said they had me and were chaining down the jet. Fortunately, the nosegear had cocked itself 90 degrees right and was flat against the scupper. We'll never know if the jet's momentum was enough to cross the scupper if the gear hadn't been cocked. My Hornet was hooked to a tractor and pulled back on deck.

My final checkers looked at the nosegear and decided I was "good to go." I went to the cat, got shot off, uneventfully completed the mission, and returned to mom.

The OOD said the ship had sailed into the trough of a large swell. The ship's port side had dropped five degrees at the moment I taxied between the 3- and 4-wires. The normal maximum list the ship wants is two degrees when taxiing jets.

The loss of peripheral vision because of the fog on the canopy took away most of my external cues as to how fast I was taxiing on the flight deck.

Don't let the get-the-sortie mindset drive you into a bad decision. I was closer to ejecting than I've ever been, and I was a bit shaken. I should have told my flight-deck coordinator I'd had enough and wanted him to shut me down.

Overall, the ship and the jet were in the wrong place at the wrong time, and I was along for the ride.

Lt. Goodman flies with VFA-83.