



PH1 James Williams

“Suspend Cat One!”

by Lt. Joe Girard

It was supposed to be a good deal: a day close-air-support mission at the start of our third month of combat operations over Kosovo. I had finished the FRS only a few months earlier and was excited about the prospect of raging around on a combat hop with another JO and coming back to the ship for an OK-3 wire.

After our brief and some quick chow, we manned up and went through the standard pre-launch procedures. I had no idea that a failing hydraulic pump was about to put an end to this good deal. My lead had already launched and was on his way to the KC-135, where we had planned to rendezvous. As I taxied to the cat, I spread my wings, rogered the weight board, and finished my takeoff checklist. Everything looked good with no warnings or cautions. I followed my director’s signals, had my weapons armed, and went into tension.

As the engines spooled up, I wiped out the controls and began my habitual sweep of the cockpit, beginning with the hydraulic gauge on my right side. I knew something was not quite right when I noticed the No. 1 hydraulic system reading 2,000 psi instead of the normal 3,000 psi. With no other indications, I briefly entertained the notion that it must be a faulty gauge, and I could still go flying.

Following that split-second of hesitation, I called, “Suspend cat one,” and was quickly spun off the cat, telling the tower I had a hydraulic problem. Our maintenance people made a valiant attempt to get a new hydraulic-pressure indicator up to the flight deck before the launch was over, but time ran out.

After I endured some good-natured ribbing in the ready room about not going flying because of a bad gauge, maintenance control reported that the gauge had checked good, and the problem was a hydraulic pump that was beginning to fail. If I had launched with this faulty pump, I very likely would have been operating on one hydraulic system soon after launch.

The hydraulic gauge in the FA-18 is the only indicator the pilot has to determine the status of the hydraulic pumps. Some pilots might not check this critical piece of information before a cat shot. Every pilot should review their pre-launch instrument scan, making sure to include all essential items. Had I not noticed the problem with my No. 1 hydraulic system, my good deal could have easily turned into a bad day. 🦅

Lt. Girard flies with VFA-15.