

CHOP TIME

Not the Sailor

The yellowshirt tumbled across the flight deck like tumbleweed in a Texas ghost town.

By Lt. Jason J. Clendaniel

The flight deck is a busy and, often, scary place. On a December night, I learned how busy and how scary it could be.

Our Hawkeye squadron just had arrived in the Northern Arabian Gulf to support Operation Southern Watch. The air wing and flight-deck personnel had worked closely for the last six months during the IDTC period and were used to seeing the same aircraft, launch sequences, and yellowshirt procedures. Today, we were launching for a quick, single-cycle hop for my left seat CAPC and myself. The plan was to get night current; our flights had been constrained by position of intended movement (PIM).

On this third and final man-up of the day, we pushed through the checks, pulled out of the Hummer hole, and taxied to the landing area. I went through the takeoff checklist as we prepared for the cat shot into the milky night. Before we pulled out of the landing area, I remember looking around at the relatively empty flight deck and saying, "We're clear all the way to the cat."

We taxied behind cat 1 and reviewed the checklists; we were complete down to wings and

PROP,

controls. A Tomcat would launch first, followed by us. We temporarily were halted behind JBD 2, facing JBD 1 at a 45-degree angle. My pilot scanned to the left, hawking his director, while I checked and cleared to our right.

The Tomcat on cat 1 didn't launch because of a mechanical malfunction. As he started to pull out of tension, a yellowshirt walked between our plane and the JBD. The JBD began to lower, and the Tomcat came up on power to taxi off the cat.

The first thing I saw was the yellowshirt's back arch like a banana from the wind over the deck; he held his back to the Tomcat. Within a split second, he slipped off his feet and fell to the deck. I yelled two choice words and bagged the right engine with the T-handle. The yellowshirt tumbled across the flight deck like tumbleweed in a Texas ghost town. Fortunately, he was blown past the propeller by 10 feet. We quickly were tied down, the aircraft was secured, and we went to our ready room to sort out the details of this close call.

When we visited the Sailor in medical, he said he was very aware of the propeller. He kicked and clawed for his life as he slid down

the deck in our direction. He had several cuts, scrapes and bruises, but, given the other possibilities, he was relieved.

The flight deck is a dangerous place. What seems routine in naval aviation easily can turn into disaster in the blink of an eye. My eyes were at the right place at the right time because we routinely brief the copilot's responsibility to keep the aircraft clear on the right. On deck, our doctrine always has been both pilots have free rein of the T-handles and brakes.

We managed to exercise what we briefed, and we are fortunate we still have our yellow-shirt working with us today. I went to sleep that night knowing that vigilance and a good brief had allowed me to save a life. Never get lulled into a sense of routine on the flight deck. Keep a fast scan going, as if you were on instruments and in the goo. Always watch other aircraft and the direction their exhaust is pointing to see if it's sweeping across any of our personnel. Their world and yours can get turned upside down in a heartbeat. 

Lt. Clendaniel flies with VAW-116.