

courses of action: blowing the gear down and landing on Highway 395, or doing a gear-up landing on the dry salt beds of Owens Lake. I quickly discounted any amazing display of superhuman airmanship and returned to the problem at hand. I had tried a few APU restarts, looking for a way to crank the engines if they continued to rollback. But the APU restart envelope is marginal under the best of conditions, and that didn't work. The ground was getting closer and closer, the cars on the highway were getting bigger and bigger, and that irritating laughter in my head grew louder and louder.

I reached Owens Valley and was starting to turn into the wind for what I thought would be the start of my ejection sequence when the left engine finally came to life, quickly followed by the right. The flight data recorded by the aircraft showed an altitude of 1,216 feet AGL and airspeed of 296 knots. All told, I had lost over 13,000 feet. Regaining some composure and turning for home, I informed the controller, in the calmest voice I could muster at the time, that I had a "few issues" I needed to take care of and was returning to base.

The RTB was uneventful. I had regained enough equipment to guide me home and it was a clear day, which made the navigation easy. End of story? Certainly not. When it rains it pours. Just for entertainment, I had two unsafe main mounts when I arrived. With that problem solved, 40 minutes after taking off, I was back on deck, kissing the good earth, very glad to be out of aircraft 403 and still in one piece.

Interpretation of the post-flight data (with the help of Boeing and NADEP engineers) revealed the left, primary, engine-feed valve had failed to reopen after being closed via the fire light. Once the right-engine fire light was closed and the cross-feed valve shut, the left engine was starved of fuel and shut down. Maintainers replaced the left-engine feed valve



and the aircraft returned to an up status.

I came away with a renewed respect for the voices I hear in my head. Those voices are in our heads because of our own experiences, from listening to stories from our peers, or from reading *Approach* articles, and they are there for a reason. They are trying to keep us alive.

Operational Risk Management—assessing the threats, their likelihood of taking place, and severity of consequences if they do—works, if you use it. The fact that I had applied ORM techniques in my "what if this happens" approach to the rollback was commendable. The fact that I didn't follow them was almost criminal. When conducting check flights, it's easy to convince yourself to go flying in an aircraft that may not be fully mission capable. The Hornet allows for some quick fixes on flight-control surfaces or electronic problems, but that doesn't mean the whole problem is fixed. If minor problems resurface, especially when operating from the beach, it is easy to return to base or even complete the check flight. With an engine, however, the answer should be clear. You have little room for error, and karma isn't going to get the job done.

"Operational necessity" is a term we throw around far too loosely. It means the mission you've just been handed is more important than the lives of the pilots or the safety of their aircraft. We don't get a whole lot of operational-necessity missions a week before RIMPAC. It is one thing to recognize this fact, but another to put that mindset into action.

The decision to eject is harder than you might think. It wasn't that I felt this couldn't be happening to me, but that I didn't want to let anyone down, not my fellow aviators nor the maintenance department.

Now, having flown the FA-18 as a powered aircraft and as a glider, I can tell you there is no comparison as to which model is more enjoyable. I hope that one more horror story, one more experience shared, one more "there I was" tale of woe, will turn up the volume the next time the voices talk to you and to me. 🦅

LCdr. Pritchard flies with VFA-25.