

By Capt. Carlton Keen, USAF

A year had passed since arriving at NAS Whidbey Island, and I finally was getting my NATOPS check in the EA-6B. I had completed the F-15E RTU (replacement-training unit, the Air Force equivalent of the FRS) barely three years before, so I was more than ready to get out of the training command and again fly operationally.

I was scheduled with one of the most experienced and respected instructor pilots. He was known throughout the FRS as “the velvet hammer.” Legend was he downed a greater than average number of students. However, his downing style was velveteen, because he apparently would make you feel great about yourself, despite your substandard performance. Although he was a reserve guy, I can attest he kept his knowledge of the jet and its systems very fresh, and he was a superb FRS IP.

Despite his reputation, I wasn’t concerned. I had 500 hours of fighter time and had taken numerous check rides: I knew how the game was played. We briefed for a two-ship formation flight in one of the local MOAs. The flight was uneventful until the recovery. Although the fuel gauge indicated a safe fuel state, the low-fuel light flickered. My IP ran a BIT on the fuel gauge, and all indications were normal. We preemptively ran through the PCL and checked our fuel-switch positions and circuit breakers. Because the light was not continu-

ously on, and our wingman saw no fuel streaming from us, I saw no need to land ASAP. I also did not advise my instructor to do so. We agreed the low-fuel circuitry was receiving spurious inputs. We cleared our wingman to land and flew out to the radar pattern to do simulated emergencies for my NATOPS check.

In the pattern, the low-fuel light stayed on. My IP told base of our problem, and the duty officer advised him to land immediately. He told the ODO he believed the indications were false, and he planned on pressing with the check ride.

While I agreed with the assessment the low-fuel indications were spurious, I knew in my heart the right thing to do was land and let maintenance look it over. I made a weak protest against his decision to press but made no serious effort to persuade him to put the jet on the ground. We finished the check ride and landed uneventfully, with the low-fuel light on the entire time.

Here are a couple of lessons and observations I took away from this flight. I failed to lodge a forceful protest because I also wanted to complete the check—a definite case of senioritis. I also let my instructor’s greater experience in the Prowler prevent me from objecting to his in-flight decisions. I certainly didn’t know the Prowler like I knew the Strike Eagle, but I knew better than to fly around with a low-fuel light. I never felt in danger of flaming out, and we were in sight of the field at all times, but staying airborne was not what I call professional aviation. Furthermore, I was reluctant to get into a great contest of wills with the guy who was grading me. Bottom line: Never be afraid to say what needs to be said. 

Capt. Keen flies with VAQ-133.

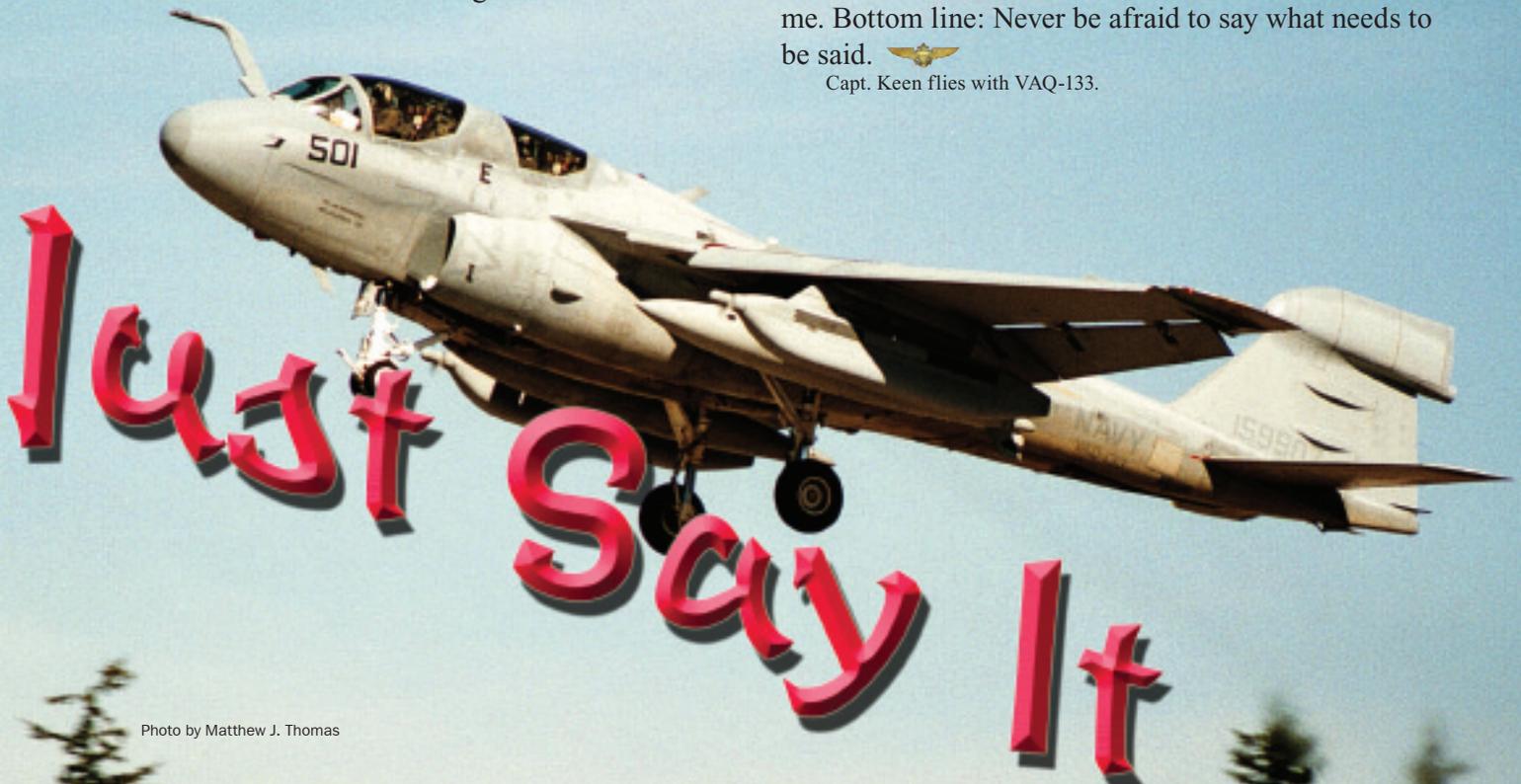


Photo by Matthew J. Thomas