

Taxi *and* **Half** *a* **Half**

by Lt. Kerry Kuykendall

Our squadron was aboard for a standard fleet CQ det. I had completed four day traps and was ready to fly that night. All I needed was four night traps to be complete.

As we briefed, we discussed whether or not we should wear dry suits, since the water was 51 degrees. We decided not to wear the dreaded bags. We hustled to the wardroom for a quick bite, then my RIO and I manned up for the 1900 launch. Our jet was parked on the fantail, and I noticed how dark it was out there. We taxied to the catapult for our night CQ period.

After our third trap, we headed to cat 1 for our last cat shot and trap. A Hornet was on cat 2. We taxied into the cat track, and the holdback fitting was hooked up. We got the signal to kneel the jet and waited to be taxied into the shuttle.

I noticed some commotion behind me on the left side of my jet. Troubleshooters were trying to say that the jet was down for some reason. Just after that, the hydraulic-pressure light lit up on my master caution panel. The combined side hydraulics read 2,600 psi (instead of 3,000). The bi-directional pump (back-up mechanism) was holding the pressure at its current level. I told my RIO, and she asked tower for a rep so we could relay this to our CATCC rep.

As we realized that the jet was down, all I could think about was that I only had one more night trap to complete. It looked like I was going to have to come back out the next day to finish up.

During our chat with the rep, the deck crew had taken out the holdback bar, and the yellowshirt gave us the signal to unknelt the jet. I lifted the switch to comply, but nothing happened. Then the yellowshirt gave me the signal to hold the brakes. My feet had been on the brakes the entire time. I wondered why he was giving me this signal, until I realized that we had started to move.

I transmitted on the ICS to my RIO, "Lost brakes." She transmitted this over tower frequency. My lights came on, and I put the hook down. I pumped the brakes once and then pulled the parking brake handle. I initially thought pulling the parking brake had stopped us, but it hadn't. I figured we'd just ground-loop the jet or steer it into the Hornet next to us on cat 2. Going through the lost-brakes bold-face, I cycled nosewheel steering, checked that the anti-skid switch was off, and tried to steer us to the left. Nothing happened.

We continued to roll toward the catwalk to our right. I felt the first twinges of panic. We were probably going over the edge and would have to eject. Once the nose of the aircraft is over the edge, we would be out of the ejection envelope and would run the risk of ejecting into the water or the side of the carrier. Our decision not to wear our dry suits wasn't looking too cool.

We were pointed at the widest part of the catwalk, with a CWIS gun mount past it. Based on our taxi speed, I knew we were going over the scupper, and I was 99 percent sure we were going to stop in the catwalk. I said to my RIO, "Stay with

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me, stay with me.” I knew her hand would be on the ejection handle. We went over the scupper and stopped approximately 30 degrees nose down, with our nosewheel in the cat walk.

Tower was telling us that they were chaining us down and that we weren't going anywhere. I wasn't going to be sure of that until we were out of the jet. We kept the engines running to ensure our ICS was working in case we still had to eject. Tower then told us that we were chained down, and we shut down the engines. We safed the ejection seats, raised the canopy and climbed out of the jet.

I learned several lessons. First, don't end up wishing you had your dry suit on when you are faced with an ejection. Wishing isn't going to help.

Next, hydraulic failures are serious business, especially around the boat. I should have insisted that we get chocked as soon as I realized there was a hydraulic problem.

Think about what you'll do if you lose brakes on the flight deck. Where will you stay with the jet? Where will you eject? I had thought about this situation before, and I'm convinced this saved us from ejecting.

Ideally, your RIO trusts your decisions, yet will pull the funny yellow-and-black handle if needed. After reviewing the PLAT tape of the incident, nobody would have faulted us for ejecting. Some people were shocked that we hadn't. 🦅

Lt. Kuykendall flies with VF-32.

