

When Do You

by L.Cdr. Leif Steinbaugh

Everyone has their own lines drawn in the sand when it comes to risk. Some of those lines are inviolate. Some fall into gray areas: areas where the decision is not clear-cut, and where judgment and experience make all the difference. A recent incident made me rethink my lines in the sand.

Our carrier was working off Australia in support of exercise Tandem Thrust '01. The mission was EWCAS in support of Hornets and Tomcats going across the beach. Because of aircraft availability, we had to do a hot refueling and hot switch. Our jet was spotted abreast cat 2, with its exhaust blowing over the side. This would prove to be a factor in the events later.

Since the Prowler is always at the top of the marshal stack, we were in a time crunch to make the next launch. The hot switch went fine, with the backseaters giving me a quick debrief on the status of the jet. I hopped into the ECMO-3 ejection seat and did a quick cockpit wipeout. We then did a cross-bleed start and shut down the right engine so the other ECMOs

could switch out. After that, we did the hot-refueling checklist and waited for the gas to flow. While we were refueling, the pilot completed the point checks with the plane captain (PC).

When the refueling was completed and we had started the second engine, ECMO 2 asked me if I had the RRS tape bag. I replied that I did not. Standard operating procedure for a hot switch required the offgoing crew to leave the bag in the jet, so I expected it to be in the aft cockpit somewhere. We searched but

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You Cross the Line?

could not find the bag. Our concern was FOD in the cockpit, so we had to find the bag. I informed the pilot of the problem, raised the aft canopy, and signaled for the flight-deck coordinator (FDC) to come up and talk to me. He asked me what he should do if the bag was found in the ready room. I told him the priority was to find the bag, and if possible, to have it for the mission.

Immediately after the FDC climbed down, the yellowshirt took control of the aircraft. The flight deck was in a rush to break us down because we were fouling cat 2, and they couldn't launch the E-2 off of cat 3 because of our exhaust. They broke us down and taxied us aft of cat 1 and held us there. About this time, the yellowshirt handed us off to our PC, who indicated to me to raise the aft canopy. We had armed our ejection seats

when we were broken down, so we were sitting on hot seats. I told the pilot of the PC's signal and said I was not going to raise the aft canopy.

Here is where we come to one of my lines in the sand. I will not safe my ejection seat and raise my canopy in a jet that is not tied down to the flight deck. The only thing keeping that jet from moving and going over the side is the brake system, which is powered by hydraulics. If the hydraulics or brakes fail,

that jet would start to move across the flight deck and could go over the side. That is not the type of situation you want to be in with a safed ejection seat and an open canopy.

The PC continued to signal me to open the aft canopy. I kept refusing, shaking my head and giving him the *go fly* hand signal. This confused him even more. The FDC walked up to the side of the jet and showed me the tape bag. I knew they wanted to give me the bag, but I wanted them to tie me down before I raised the canopy. I tried to signal this to them but was unable to get my message across. We then decided to go without the bag, but we couldn't get this across to the FDC, either. The FDC even climbed up the boarding ladder and tapped on the canopy. Even the yellowshirts were signaling to us to open our aft canopy. It was mass confusion for the guys huddled around our jet on the flight deck.

It was obvious to us that we were going to miss the launch unless we did something fast. As the operations officer, I needed a night trap on the pilot. As an aircrew, I needed the flight time. So I crossed my line in the sand. We quickly discussed the options, safed our ejection seats, and I raised the aft canopy. I grabbed the bag about the same time the boss came over the radio and told us to open the aft canopy. We quickly shut the canopy, armed our seats, and taxied to the cat, getting launched just in time.

I learned a few things that night. I succumbed to the external pressures that face all aircrew. Was the night trap that important? No. Was there operational necessity? No. Were we going into combat? No. Was there any reason to increase the risks to the lives of the crew and the maintainers that night? No. 🛩️

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