

I Can Hack It

By LCdr. Greg Coupe

Ever had a cold and felt pressured to fly, saying to yourself, “I can hack it”? I was a first-tour ECMO, flying in the last phase of workups, when I awoke feeling run-down. I had the typical cold symptoms: stuffy nose, headache, tiredness and chills. I took myself off the flight schedule, ignored the Ops O’s snide comments, self-medicated and went back to the rack.

I felt much better the following day; the cold symptoms were gone, except for a runny nose. I easily could clear my ears, and I told the Ops O to put me on the schedule.

We briefed at 0300 the following day, which was the first day of the JTFEX war. The skipper asked if I really was OK to fly, and I told him I was fine and not to worry. We launched at 0500. I sneezed and blew my nose a few times during the climbout and mission. As we made the initial descent, out of marshal on a Case III approach, I felt pressure in my ears and cleared them with a valsalva. Farther along the descent, the pressure came roaring back. A valsalva again cleared my ears, but the pressure in my forehead continued to intensify. Around 5,000 feet, the pain became unbearable—toe curling, sharp and more intense—like a needle was being jabbed between my eyes.

The ECMO next to me asked if I was OK; I barely was able to answer. The pilot leveled off, and, after a few moments, the pressure subsided enough to where I could continue. I told him I was well enough to press on with the approach. About 2,000 feet later, the blinding pain was

back, but I didn’t say anything. I merely wanted to land and end the torture session.

The sinus pain suddenly disappeared on touchdown, much to my relief. In exchange, I now had a wicked headache. In the ready room, I told my story during the debrief, not fully aware of the chastising I was about to receive—my CO was not pleased. He ordered me to see the flight surgeon. I left the ready room slouched over and feeling defeated.

The thorough exam included sinus X-rays, which revealed I had torn my frontal sinus. That explained why the pressure had subsided, but I had been left with the headache. I was grounded for 30 days, placed in the “healing chair” (nighttime SDO), forbidden to fly home on the C-9 or commercial aircraft, and advised not to drive or to take a bus over the Rockies.

The carrier pulled into Mayport two weeks later. My very pregnant wife was in Whidbey Island, and Christmas was in five days. How was I going to get home? Hours later, I was in a taxi heading to the AMTRAK station for a cross-country journey, in coach class and not a sleeper car. The next three days gave me plenty of time to determine if it was worth trying to hack it. ✈️

LCdr. Coupe flies with VAQ-134.

A classic case of “I told you so!”—Cdr. Nicholas Webster, MD, MPH, aeromedical analyst, Naval Safety Center.

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