

was enjoying a post-debrief PB-and-J in the dirty shirt, when I heard the bad news. CVW-1 had just completed its last air-wing strike at the end of a challenging COMPTUEX-JTFEX. The flyoff was scheduled for early the next morning, and I was looking forward to being feet-dry in CONUS after seven weeks at sea.

My diligent Ops O hunted me down and said, "Have I got a good deal for you..." The powers-that-be had decided that our air wing hadn't been stressed enough, and that another strike, to be scheduled on the morning of the flyoff (a Sunday, of all things), was in order. I was the lucky JO assigned the lead. "Another opportunity to excel," declared my boss.

Of all the dumb luck. But no sense complaining about it, I thought. Might as well spread the wealth and start tasking those scheduled for the strike; maybe we could all manage to get into our racks at a reasonable hour. The CAG staffers issued the

began calling ready rooms trying to nail down the lineup. One duty petty officer commented to me, "Sir, it's 3 a.m. We won't expect any pilots in here until about 8." Three a.m.? Where had the time gone? The brief was at 0700, and I had a decision to make. I could say that I was done planning and head off for a few hours of shuteye. Or, I could pull the dreaded all-nighter, get a shower and a shave, and a bite to eat before the brief. Thinking that I would wind up feeling more tired after the short nap than before, I opted to stay up and apply some polish to CVW-1's final hoorah off the Carolina coast.

The brief went without a hitch, and the flight, delayed an hour because of the lack of a plane-guard helo, also went as advertised. The picture presented by the red-air forces made absolutely certain that we would be busy in our jets. It was a hazy day. Multiple groups of bogeys and bandits waited for us on our route and in the target area, keeping all of us awake. The slow-movers executed

Welcome to the Land of NOD

by Lt. Anthony Breyer

targets, and I assigned the fighter lead to fellow LSO bud. The two of us came up with the plan, then began sweating the small stuff. At midnight, the fighter lead binged to his stateroom, and I began crunching the kneeboard cards. I realized that I needed to borrow a bigger ready room, as the total body count on the strike had risen from eight motivated warriors to a whopping 24. No room for that many warm bodies in Ready Nine on the JFK.

Our fighter squadron's ready room was empty, so I commandeered it and began putting up the board. Formation and flow snapshots complete, I

the mission and then headed home, and the pointy-nosed jets went back to mom for Case III straight-ins. After a quickie CVIC debrief, we all scattered to pack and be on our way.

I was dragging. It was now 1100, and I had been awake since 0800 the previous day. For about a nanosecond, my brain entertained the thought of giving my flyoff seat to a junior JO, then I thought about all of the wonderful pilot-relief modes in the Hornet and the ribeye and beer I had left for myself in the fridge at home. I wanted to go home.

After yet another uneventful man-up, launch and three-plane rendezvous, fatigue began to set in. I felt euphoric whenever I allowed my eyes to close for a moment. Soon, those moments began to last ever so slightly longer. I found myself awakening, in formation, not having remembered when I had shut my eyes. “Don’t do that again,” I thought to myself. What I would have given for a stick of gum or a radio station to listen to or a thumb tack to stick in my thigh—anything to help stay awake. I began pumping up the G suit and turning on the a.c. full blast, trying to find ways to turn my jet into a 30-million-dollar entertainment center. I recall

snapping alert two more times during that trip home, each time flying right where I needed to be. Fortunately, we were trucking home at mil minus nothing, and 40 minutes later, we were overhead sunny Jacksonville in the break.

Ever seen that picture of the biplane engorged on a tree? The caption reads, in effect, that flying is not dangerous in and of itself, but it is unforgiving of mistakes. On that day, my judgment was clouded by both fatigue and pressure to get the job done. I flew twice that day, flagrantly violating crew-rest regulations on both occasions. Fortunately, for my shipmates and myself, the worst mistake I made was deciding to fly in the first place, rather than drifting into a wingman or into the Atlantic, semi-conscious at the wheel. ✈️

Lt. Breyer flies with VFA-86.



Cockpit photo by Mike Silva
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