



The damaged electrical-load center.

Another Day at the Office

By Lt. Tony Rhodes

It started out as just another day at the office, with my crew preparing for our single-cycle, SSC-recovery-tanker flight. The pilot was an experienced second cruiser. He delivered a thorough brief that covered all the usual contingencies. A squadron TACCO and a SENSO from the ship's company joined us to troubleshoot some computer systems that lately had caused problems.

During our brief JTFEX period and the first few days of deployment, our deck had been running a little slower than normal. The word was out for S-3 guys to plan on launching 15 minutes before the scheduled event launch, instead of the usual 10 minutes. We also were supposed to start walking to our jet even earlier than usual, allowing time to start the APU 45 minutes before the launch time. This would help the deck crew speed up things.

After briefing and eating, our pilot read the book and got on deck early to preflight aircraft 707. I got to the jet on time, helped with the preflight,



and got in before the APU start-up signal was given. Predictably, our new and much lauded CAINS II navigation system, which all of our jets had been outfitted with during the past six months, was not aligning properly. After trying the secondary- and tertiary-alignment procedures, as well as all the usual troubleshooting methods, we still could not obtain a platform. It was time to shut down the No.2 engine and to get a troubleshooter.

By this time, the boss was getting anxious about launching the oncoming recovery tanker, and he was looking for some answers. I told him our dilemma, but, after a few more minutes of troubleshooting, it was time to switch jets or to do further minor maintenance to get an alignment started. Either way, it would take at least 15 minutes to be ready.

With 13 minutes to our scheduled launch, we found ourselves sprinting to 706, our second jet. We just had to fire it up and still make our scheduled launch time, getting our tanker airborne and saving the event. Since we were in the first week of cruise and flying blue-water operations, the heavies demanded at least two tankers overhead at all times before they would launch any other jets.

The jet was parked near cat 2, and our stellar maintenance team had started 706's APU. I arrived first, skipped the preflight, and threw myself into the right seat. The SENSO arrived next and started moving the frick (lead weights that occupy the fourth seat, which is usually unoccupied) into the tunnel. I immediately started the alignment on the CAINS II, since that again surely would be our limiting factor.

With the alignment going, I set up my side of the cockpit as the pilot and TACCO showed up. Following a quick preflight of his seat, the pilot began his contortionist act to climb into the seat.

Just then, the lights and power began to dim and flicker, similar to the way they might with a failing APU generator or external-power source. We looked at each other, and he said exactly what we were thinking, "What the *#\$% is wrong now?" As he reached up to check the electrical-control panel, I looked into the tunnel to check the status of the backseaters and to see if a troubleshooter was around. As I glanced back, all I could see was the SENSO standing in the tunnel, haloed by an angelic plume of shooting sparks. I turned to my pilot and nonchalantly proclaimed, "There's a fire in the back."

The pilot looked back to see our AW1 surrounded by radiant sparks and blue flames, and instantly yelled, "Fire! Get out! Get out of the jet!"

The AW1 quickly scurried down through the hatch and met our TACCO outside. The pilot followed him as I struggled to get unstrapped, still in disbelief as to

the seriousness of our situation. The cockpit now rapidly was filling with dense smoke and acrid fumes. My pilot stayed behind and was yelling at me to get out. As I finally released myself from what felt like "the chains that bound me," I noticed torch-like flames and heard a popcorn-like sound of molten-metal fragments shooting out of the circuit-breaker panel, which is near the aft ejection-seat rockets.

As I dragged my nav bag from the side of my seat, I reached up and instinctively shut down the APU before slipping out the hatch. I ran a few yards away from the jet. As aviators often do, once we safely were outside and were sure everyone had made it out unscathed, we laughed at our situation and ourselves. I still am not sure if my eyes could have been as wide open and bug-eyed as those of my crew members.

After reviewing my actions, I decided saving my nav bag shouldn't have been a priority. Surprisingly, the item foremost on my mind at that moment was the question of how long it would take to get another jet fired-up.

We eventually manned 700 and got it started, only to have our event cancelled because of time. However, we were able to stay in our turning jet another hour and to launch with the following event.

Later that night, we saw pictures of the electrical-load center in 706. If I hadn't shut down the APU, we probably would have lost the jet. It turned out that wires aft of the circuit-breaker panel had loosened, began to spark, and then arced across a metal bracket, causing this nasty electrical fire. The whole process essentially transformed the wire bundle into a blowtorch, which melted through a three-inch steel bracket. Molten-steel fragments (the popcorn-like sound I had heard) shot throughout the tunnel. It was fortunate our SENSO wasn't in the main stream of sparks, and his flight gear protected him.

Had this freak accident occurred in flight, we surely would have lost the jet. Even if we did fly the jet on standby gyro, or if the emergency battery had continued to power the pilot's CAINS-gyro display after losing electricity, we would not have had time to make any approach to the ship. The smoke and acrid fumes would have been unbearable in a matter of seconds.

Sometimes, saving the event launch isn't the most important thing to consider when troubleshooting. It also was a reminder that no day on the carrier is just another day at the office. 🛩️

Lt. Steve Koffler, Lt. Chris Johnson and AW1 John Biggs helped Lt. Rhodes with this article. They fly with VS-33.