

Dude, Where's My Jet?

By Ltjg. Charles Liles

I walked to my jet for a night training flight. Our squadron was eight days from departing on cruise, so the schedule was full of training flights. Earlier in the day, I had completed my level II, 2 v 1, air-combat-maneuvering (ACM) syllabus flight.

Although I was tired, already having spent 10 hours between flying and working on my ground jobs, I felt relatively confident I could complete this final evolution of the day. I still was within our squadron's crew-day limits stated in our standard-operating procedures (SOP). The flight was to consist of section, night-vision goggle (NVG), high altitude, roll-in attacks, followed by a field-carrier-landing practice (FCLP) period at Fentress Outlying Field.

I read the aircraft-discrepancy book (ADB) for aircraft 403, signed the "A" sheet, and walked to the jet. After preflight, I climbed into the cockpit. As the plane captain helped strap me in, he mentioned something about the previous pilot not parking aircraft 407 in the correct spot. He then asked me to park farther up the line when I returned.

I remembered looking at him and saying, "Alright, but I'm in 403." He smiled, nodded his head, and said, "Yes sir."

The start-up, taxi, launch, goggle-up, and join-up were uneventful and required little attention as we flew south to the target complex. However, once we started our section roll-ins, things became more difficult. I lost sight of my lead during the first pull off target and then again while trying to join up. I attributed these problems to having trouble adjusting my goggles after pulling 5 Gs off target. We subsequently made two more attacks that went smoother. Complete with the NVG

training, my lead detached me for the FCLP period, while he stayed back to work with another nugget in the target area.

My bounce period began uneventfully until another section joined me in the pattern. After both members of the section made their first passes, I realized that Dash 2 was calling the ball as 403. Thinking that the pilot just had made a mistake, I continued to make my calls, using the same callsign. However, the other pilot continued to make his calls as 403, as well.

After about three passes, I remembered my earlier conversation with the plane captain before takeoff: something about 407 having parked in the wrong place. It then hit me: I had manned-up the wrong jet. Trying to compartmentalize, I continued to work the pattern but changed my callsign to 407. When complete with the FCLP period, I left Fentress for the visual straight-in at Oceana.

Feeling a bit tired and very embarrassed for having someone else's jet, I failed to pick up on arrival control telling me there had been a runway change since we had launched. I flew to about seven miles from the approach end of runway 05 before seeing a string of taxi lights lined up for runway 32. I finally realized my mistake, told tower, and sequenced myself for an approach to the duty runway.

By this point, I was very concerned about my performance. I had launched in the wrong jet, lost sight of my lead twice on NVGs, and started an approach to the wrong runway—not exactly a solid flight. I also was beginning to feel signs of fatigue. I focused the rest of my attention on making a safe landing back at Oceana.

After debriefing with my lead and having an awkward discussion with my skipper, I had plenty of opportunities to rethink the flight. I took away several learning points. First and foremost, safety of flight is more important than the ground tasks I had been



“OK, 403 here, ready to go...”

working on earlier in the day. Instead of spending three hours running errands for the coffee mess, I could have stayed home a little longer and rested. I knew these two events would be challenging. An ACM hop, followed by my first NVG section roll-ins, with an FCLP on the back end, is a fairly dynamic day.

Although I was technically within the limits of our squadron SOP as far as crew rest and crew day goes, I should have paid more attention to the level of stress I faced that day and adjusted my schedule. My all-or-nothing attitude directly correlated to the level of fatigue I felt as I walked into my second flight.

Second, I learned not to ever rush when something feels wrong. I should have listened more closely when the plane captain was talking to me while I strapped in. I did not understand exactly what he said: that 403 and 407 had switched positions in the line. Instead of hurrying to start engines and beat my lead to marshal, I should have paused for a second and asked the plane captain what he was talking about. In retrospect, I bet the plane captain thought I was joking with him. Had I

taken the time to figure out what he was saying, I could have saved myself some embarrassment, and realized earlier that my situational awareness was significantly degraded that night.

Finally, I never should have allowed myself to get complacent after discovering I had walked to the wrong jet. My level of concern simply was not high enough. Had I been a bit more ill-at-ease with my previous performance, I probably would have listened more carefully to arrival control and avoided any confusion as to the active runway.

What should have been a routine night-training flight became a source of mortification for me professionally. However, as naval aviators, we must learn from our mistakes. Fighting complacency, ensuring procedural compliance, and preserving safety of flight take precedence over all other issues. I thought I knew and understood these concepts well before manning up on that summer night; however, I managed to violate all of them at least once. 🦅

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