

# Vertigo on the Ball

## *Spatial* DISORIENTATION

By Lt. Rebecca Adams

I had heard the vertigo stories: It feels like you're spinning in circles, or in a constant angle of bank, unable to differentiate between upright and inverted. I, however, was a vertigo virgin, until one night during Operation Enduring Freedom.

The rolling sensation started as I passed through platform and never stopped.

Let me set the stage. The weather was anything but clear—1,500 feet overcast, three-to-four-foot seas, and not a hint of a horizon. I was returning from a 6.5-hour mission over the beach for the final recovery of the night. I hoped the debrief would be minimal, so I could make rats. The flight had been uneventful: We had had five hours of solid NVG tac wing, with some exciting tanking to mix things up a bit. My lead and I were above 20,000 feet for the majority of the flight, and we had no idea what awaited us during our CV 1 approach.

After receiving marshall instructions, I detached from lead to attack the dreadful time-distance-heading problem that preceded each Case III, CV 1 approach. I began the descent, and my nightmare began. The turbulence was like nothing I ever had felt before. My Hornet was tossed around, and I seemed to bounce between layers of black and gray storm clouds, with lightning in the background for added excitement.

I couldn't tell when my descent started and stopped by looking outside, only by what my altimeter read. The rolling sensation started as I passed through platform and never stopped. I broke my rate of descent, but that did not help the sensation. As I leveled off at 1,200 feet, I stared at my instruments in hopes of recaging my head for the landing—no luck.

The boat seemed to be jackknifing up and down, like a little cork in a bowl of water. I could not make out the back of the ship from the front; the ship appeared to be flipping end over end. I continued with the approach and followed my needles. The ball call was stem power at its best; I don't remember making the call. At that point, the LSO took over. I was low and going lower.

"Power...power...easy with it...power back on," the LSO called.

My left hand was responding to the LSO calls, not to what my eyes were seeing. From three quarters of a mile and in, I could not make out the shape of the landing area, let alone tell you which way was up. The sudden deceleration of my jet in the wires was a shock but a welcome

one. I had shaky legs like you read about, and I hardly could taxi out of the landing area.

One of my squadronmates was on the pickle that night, and I credit my survival to that familiar voice. I could not have landed the jet by myself, and, in retrospect, maybe I should have been waved off. However, paddles had no idea I had such a severe case of vertigo, and how could he? I never told him.

I never had heard someone call vertigo on the ball, and I didn't think that was an option. I just thought I needed to stop flying. I hoped I wouldn't crash into the back of the ship—maybe not the best train of thought. 🏆

Lt. Adams flies with VFA-83.

*As aviators, we calculate risks, analyze control factors, and decide whether we can do the mission. Aviators routinely push the edges of their envelope, but it is difficult to decide when we just are pushing our skill level or jumping beyond what we can handle. One of the most difficult skills to hone is to know when to ask for help. There are many control factors available to assist the carrier aviator: aircraft instruments, CATC reps, and LSOs, to name a few.*

*When our bucket is overflowing or is reaching capacity, fall back on those who are in place to assist us. Fess up, and admit your situation. It is better to be a little embarrassed about calling up CATC with the leans or calling vertigo on the ball than to lose lives and assets. Had the pilot called vertigo on the ball, she could have been waved off and set up for a Mode 1 approach. The LSOs did an excellent job staying ahead of the pilot and talking her down. The pilot did a good job listening to the LSOs. But neither realized until later how fortunate they were at the outcome of this pass.*

*In the Hornet, getting the switchology correct is imperative for a coupled approach. Don't wait for it to be your night in the barrel to figure out which buttons to push. Try one or two Mode 1 approaches during each line period—it will not hurt your GPA. Practice will keep the procedures fresh and give you confidence in the system.*

*If CAG or squadron SOP prohibits nuggets from flying Mode 1 approaches, try one or two in the simulator to keep the skills fresh.*

—Lt. Lyndsi Bates, FA-18 analyst, Naval Safety Center.