

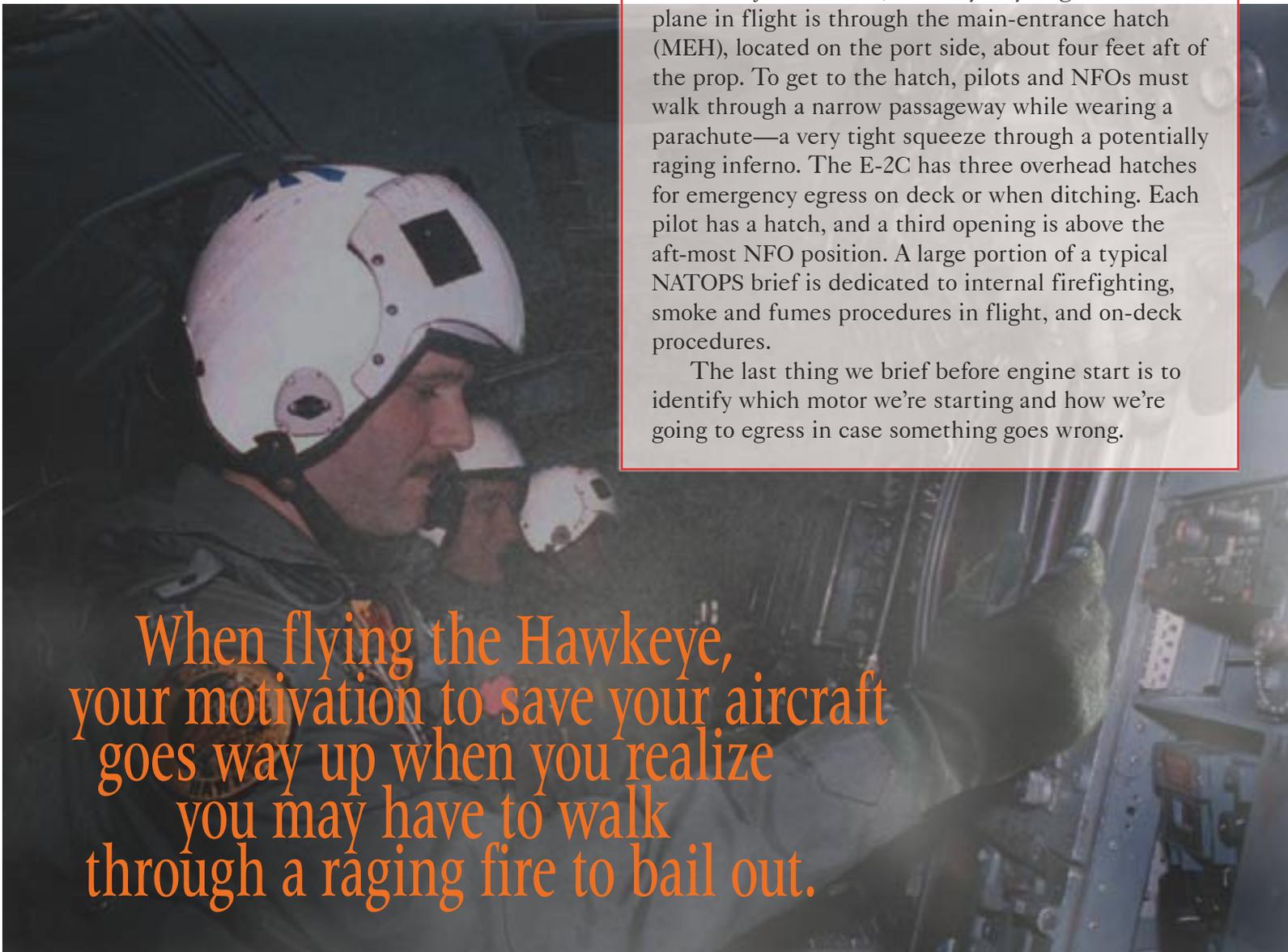
# Common Sense Would Dictate

By Lt. Sam Kesler

Everyone entering the E-2 community quickly learns that the mighty War Hummer lacks some hardware jet guys sometimes take for granted. I'm not talking about afterburners or missiles, though. Here's a hint: It's got a yellow and black striped handle attached to it and lets you give a jet back to the taxpayers in record time.

When flying the Hawkeye, your motivation to save your aircraft goes way up when you realize you may have to walk through a raging fire to bail out. Without ejection seats, the only way to get out of the plane in flight is through the main-entrance hatch (MEH), located on the port side, about four feet aft of the prop. To get to the hatch, pilots and NFOs must walk through a narrow passageway while wearing a parachute—a very tight squeeze through a potentially raging inferno. The E-2C has three overhead hatches for emergency egress on deck or when ditching. Each pilot has a hatch, and a third opening is above the aft-most NFO position. A large portion of a typical NATOPS brief is dedicated to internal firefighting, smoke and fumes procedures in flight, and on-deck procedures.

The last thing we brief before engine start is to identify which motor we're starting and how we're going to egress in case something goes wrong.



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A typical brief would go, “OK, this will be a huffer start of the left motor. In the event of a fire or other emergency, egress will be out the overhead-ditching hatches. Everybody run upwind. Beware of the Hornet turning on our right side...any questions?”

I don’t think I’ve ever heard anyone ask a question, but I wish I’d asked a few on this day.

We’d been trying to do the acceptance flight on the newest Hawkeye in the fleet. This Hawkeye 2000 was brand new, straight from the factory, and it had been blowing up emergency generators (E-Gens) all week. Our crew of four knew that, at a certain point in the profile checklist, something could happen to the hydraulically powered E-Gen, and the whole center section of the plane would fill with smoke. The maintenance brief went smoothly, and everybody thought we finally had fixed the problem. We manned up in good spirits, and I performed a more-thorough-than-usual inspection of the E-Gen for any warning signs. Everything was impeccably clean in the new plane; even the seats were comfy—for a Hawkeye.

We got the engines online and started running our checklists. I sat in the radar-officer (RO) seat, which is the forward-most NFO seat and next to the small door that leads to the forward-equipment compartment (FEC). The E-Gen is immediately forward of the door in a rack on the right. While we were getting the radar and computer turned up, we listened on ICS as the pilots completed their checklists.

I was setting up my scope when the ACO called out, “Smoke! Smoke! Smoke!”

I glanced through the window in the FEC door and saw the compartment quickly filling with smoke. “Oh well, I guess they didn’t fix it,” I said.

For a split second, I completely was calm. I even contemplated going back to my scope, when one of the pilots yelled a few choice four-letter words and started waving hand signals at the ground crew. I gave my ACO—who has 1,000 more hours and two paygrades on me—a “What do we do now” look and realized he was giving me the same look. Meanwhile, the FEC continued to fill with smoke. I knew it was the same E-Gen problem we’d been having. Right? Why was everybody yelling? “Oh \$#!+!,” I thought, we must be in trouble.”

“Let’s get the hatch out.”

“Forget the checklist, pull the T-handles.”

*Expletives deleted.*

“It’s still smoking!”

*More expletives.*

“Do you still want the checklist?”

“Are we getting out or what?”

“Grab the hatch, we’ll go out the overheads!”

*A few more expletives.*

“It’s still smoking, but I can’t see a fire.”

“A fire, where is it... is it on fire or not?”

“The smoke is thinning a little.”

“Who said ‘fire?’”

After a few more choice words, we got the motors shut down and exited through the MEH but not before taking time to grab our oxygen masks and helmet bags.

Notwithstanding that we never got airborne, this scenario was one of the best aviation-learning experiences I’ve had. At some point during the evolution I fully had expected to have another E-Gen eat itself. When it did happen, I barely reacted. In fact, I was so comfortable with the FEC filling up with smoke that I almost went back to my scope setup. To this day, that initial sense of calm, instantly followed by the realization we were all in deep trouble, still scares me. There is an appropriate emergency procedure (EP) that covers electrical fire on deck, and two of the steps are:

- Condition levers-GRD STOP.
- Abandon aircraft.

Even without an EP to guide you, common sense would dictate you should kill the motors and get out of the plane. We not only didn’t do that, but, when we recognized we should be doing something, we couldn’t decide what. From day one at the FRS, the instructors impress upon every Hawkeye aviator how deadly serious an internal fire or smoke is, and how you instantly must react to have any chance of saving yourself and the plane. Dealing with fires comprises a major portion of our NATOPS and never is far from our thoughts when flying.

In hindsight, we immediately should have secured both motors and evacuated the plane through the hatches like we always brief we’re going to do. If this had been an actual hydraulic fire, we could have burned a brand new, straight-off-the-assembly-line Hawkeye to the ground in the time it took us to make up our minds.

Having a plan is good, briefing it is better, and quickly executing that plan can keep you from doing an unplanned opeval of your survival gear, donating body fluids, losing an airplane, or having your name stamped on a death certificate. 

Lt. Kesler flies with VAW-113.