

## A Loose Nut Behind the Stick

By LCdr. Tim Carr

**F**or the first time in two months, I would enjoy a beautiful afternoon in the Eastern Mediterranean. My air wing's participation in Operation Iraqi Freedom almost had been exclusively at night, and we were returning to a day schedule. Nobody really had grown accustomed to Dracula hours, and some of our pilots actually had become transparent, so the shift to daylight was as welcome as any port call.

My transition to the operations officer's "In the rack by 0300, out no earlier than noon" game plan was not progressing as forecast. On the first day back, I was scheduled for a 1500 launch on a good-deal, functional-check flight (FCF). I was not at the top of my game after a restless night's sleep but was confident I could handle such a simple flight. With less sleep, I had led numerous six-hour, tanking-in-the-goo, and dodging-hot-metal hops over Iraq. In comparison to

those, this flight would be a breeze.

My war bird was no hangar queen, so preflight, man-up and poststart checks went smoothly. I was enjoying the sun on my face but was surprised how tired I felt in the middle of the day. No worry, I thought, the adrenaline of a catapult shot would get me through the next hour and a half. Little did I realize, the jet and my stupidity would supply enough adrenaline to keep me wide-awake the rest of the day.

Halfway through my flight, I performed crossbleed and trailing-edge-flaps checks, shutting down one engine at a time to do so. With the right engine shut-down, I was surprised to hear a "flight controls" voice alert and watched as the nose abruptly pitched down 30 degrees. The flight controls had reverted to a very degraded state called MECH. I managed to reset the flight controls and returned to relatively straight and level flight, albeit with a slightly accelerated heart rate. I added my adrenaline pump to the mix.

The flight controls in a Hornet have a tendency to revert to MECH during FCFs. MECH occurs during crossbleed and trailing-edge-flaps checks, when the hydraulic-system demands exceed capacity during this single-engine procedure. NATOPS and the FCF checklist warn that the operating-engine rpm must be kept above 85 percent to prevent MECH reversion. I incorrectly assumed this situation had happened to

### ORM Corner

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me. After all, I was tired and 24 hours out of my sleep cycle. Maybe I failed to confirm the left-engine rpm was above 85 percent. I thought, why not do the checks again? Maintenance needs the jet, and I would hate to disappoint them. This time, I'll make darn sure the rpm is wound way up.

“Flight controls, flight controls”—how could Betty sound so calm when the jet was in a 60-degree, single-engine dive in MECH? I again reset the flight-control system and decided War Party 411 would not get another chance to do that to me. “What an idiot I was for not trusting myself the first time. No sir, not gonna do that again,” I thought. “I will play it safe and just wait for the recovery.”

It did not take me long to rationalize another attempt at the trailing-edge-flaps check. I reasoned the jet was flying fine, the flight controls had successfully reset, and I would be a hero to the maintenance master chief if I finished this thing. Two minutes later, I had one engine on line, flight controls in MECH, and a windscreen full of Med coming up to meet me.

Here's a scenario: there was no reset, and I could not pull out of my dive. I hit the water at more than 500 knots, and now I write this as a “ghost writer.”

Actually, the flight controls did reset, and I returned to level flight. My heart definitely was pumping; I would have no trouble staying awake for the Case I recovery.

That's right, Case I. I may have been wide-awake, but I was not any smarter. Zip-lip, two of my squadron mates joined up, and I merrily led us down to the s\*%#-hot break. I do not know if the break was nice because I was too distracted by Betty, who said, “Flight controls, flight controls” at the 90-degree position. Fortunately, the malfunction was a dual hydraulic-servo failure of a single stabilator, not MECH reversion. I recovered safely, without the

SHB upgrade from paddles, and I was lucky to be alive.

This flight was full of headwork errors on my part. The errors began before man-up when I didn't admit I was too tired to fly. They continued throughout the flight when I second-guessed myself and disregarded multiple warnings from the jet. Finally, coming back for the break may have been the stupidest decision I ever have made (maybe not). If the flight controls had reverted to MECH when I was at 600 feet and 85 degrees angle of bank, I would have been short of options. I wanted this day hop awfully bad, and that is what I got. I cannot pretend I was unaware of the self-induced pressure to fly. After a solid month of night flights, I wanted the day flight and a fresh look at the Case I pattern.

I knew maintenance wanted to get this jet back in action after a long time in the hangar. None of my reasons would have been worth that aircraft or my life. 🇺🇸

LCdr. Carr flies with VFA-87.



Photo by Matthew J. Thomas. Modified