

Photo by Cdr. Chris Buhlmann



I Got Deviated

By Lt. Richard Knapp
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I finally got to sit down and hack away at the stack of papers in the Div O inbox. Over the past two weeks of flying, the stack had grown higher than the monitor. I soon was told I had been scheduled for a midmorning FCF. I was unhappy, but I put it behind me, bottled up my frustration, compartmentalized like every aviator does and carried out the task at hand. Despite my initial lack of enthusiasm, we briefed with the detail and thoroughness the flight deserved and headed out.

The FCF was to be conducted within 10 miles of the field, so our fuel load of 15,400 pounds was 5,000 pounds more than needed.

Ground ops were uneventful, and our Prowler was soon orbiting over Smith Island.

The weather was clear, and a lot of VFR traffic transited our block during the check. Approach control continually gave traffic advisories, while we proceeded through the checklists. We conducted the gear and flaps-down part of the checklist first, to burn off the extra fuel, so we could do the emergency flaps and slats check at 180 knots. If everything went well, we would be complete in 20 minutes. Because we changed the order of the checks, we cycled the gear and flaps more times than if we had performed the steps in the written order.

The traffic calls were constant as we neared the last item. I repeatedly did clearing turns to find the traffic. We completed the last step of our checks by cleaning-up the flaps and slats electrically.

We told approach we were complete and requested the initial for the break. En route to the initial, at 3,000 feet and 250 knots, I had this nagging feeling something was not quite right with the aircraft. The controls were OK, and a cursory

look at the instruments and indicators appeared fine, but there was a slight airframe noise. It was similar to the noise you hear when the aircraft is in a slight sideslip, or the rudder is out of trim.

We had the field in sight, descended, and turned inbound to the initial. Something again seemed out of the ordinary as we continued to the midfield break. We slowed to gear speed moments after the break. I reached for the handle to drop the gear and stared in disbelief, as I tried to figure out why the handle already was down. At that same moment, tower tells us, "Uhh...in the break...your gear is down!"

As I completed the turn to downwind, my mind was reeling. How had this happened? It seemed impossible to concentrate on the next critical phase of flight: landing.

Everything from the break on was so sluggish. I did not fly my numbers around the

approach turn. I couldn't put the event of 15 seconds ago behind me. Just to be cautious, I flared the landing and reviewed what to do if I had gear-related problems with the brakes or nosewheel steering. It was a long taxi to the line, and I don't think a single soul said a word the entire way.

I inspected the gear, looking for any obvious overspeed damage, and notified maintenance control of what had happened. Fortunately, nothing was wrong with the aircraft, but we had several bruised egos.

I reflected on the events of that day over the next few weeks. Mistakes can happen regardless of experience or ability; you just need the right conditions. Although I felt I had compartmentalized and never thought about personal or professional issues in the jet, my ability to carry out the mission was affected.

I shouldn't have flown the FCF. I came to work with the mindset there was no way I would be flying. As a result, I wasn't as sharp as I needed to be. Aviators operate on habit patterns, which are the cornerstone of how we safely operate aircraft. But, as I was harshly reminded, as soon as we deviate from normal routines, we lose the benefit of habit patterns to keep us out of trouble.

Flexibility is the key to success, but it also is the mother of all screw-ups. Be on your guard when the plan changes. When I scanned the instruments looking for something wrong with the jet, I should have seen the obvious indications the gear was down and locked. I only saw what I wanted to see: The gear was up.

Obviously, our aircrew coordination was lacking. I didn't say something might be wrong.

I reached for the handle to drop the gear and stared in disbelief . . .

My rightseater placed too much trust in my ability and didn't back me up on critical items during configuration changes.

Unexpected events may cause you to fixate on them. Don't underestimate this fixation because it may interfere with even the most basic procedures. 

Lts. Knapp and Siemon fly with VAQ-142.