

# Just Another “Ordin

By Lt. Dennis Metz

**W**e were scheduled for our first night of field-carrier-landing practice (FCLP) since Christmas leave. The squadron just had returned from the boat three weeks earlier and would head back to the boat in another week. I was confident and ready to get home and start the weekend. The weather was typical for winter in Whidbey Island: It had rained for the past two days. But, now we had overcast skies, and it was mostly dry for our flight in the mighty Prowler.

Because of the overcast, Outlaw 501 had a three-man crew, instead of the standard two. The brief, hot pit, and crew switch went well. We flew the standard six passes without incident and set up for the landing. We came in for our last approach, selected 30-degree flaps, and landed on centerline.

I aerobraked until 100 knots, let the nose-wheel touch down, and tapped on the brakes. I called out “good brakes” and released, then reapplied the brakes to continue our deceleration. At this point, the plane shuddered and pulled to the right. I immediately released the brakes and tried to use nosewheel steering to bring the aircraft left. The plane continued to pull right. Realizing we had a blown tire, I notified the crew and applied full left brake and full left nosewheel steering to counter the pull. The plane was slowing as it continued to veer toward the right side of the runway.

I thought we would stop before we left the prepared surface. However, we quickly were approaching the runway-edge lighting, with no indication the plane would stop or come back to the left. ECMO 1, our Ops O, made the call to shut down the engines just as I pulled the parking brake in a last-ditch effort to stop. The nosewheel hit a runway light.

As the engines whined down, ECMO 1 called on the radio, “We need a crash crew,”

just before we lost all power. A second later, the right mainmount left the prepared surface. Outlaw 501 pulled abruptly to the right and came to a complete stop—with significant right wing down. The plane came to rest with the nosewheel and right mainmount in the mud and the left mainmount on the asphalt.

We yelled to each other to safe the seats and asked if everyone was OK. We were sitting in an uncomfortably leaning jet, with no lights and no way to get down. When we opened the canopies, ECMO 1 saw his side of the jet was low enough to jump down from his boarding platform. As ECMO 1 came over to open our boarding ladder, the crash crew sped by us, down the center of the runway. They couldn’t see us and assumed we had taken the long-field gear or had gone into the overrun. We got out our flashlights and tried to wave them down. The runway lights came on full bright, and the fire trucks and rescue equipment finally located us.

As we inspected the aircraft, we were impressed to see what 42,000 pounds can do to water-saturated soil. The right mainmount was two feet into the ground, and the left mainmount had made a 30-foot-long trench. The wings, pods and drop tanks were clear of the ground, and, except for some mud, they were fine. The right speedbrake had dirt and a scrape mark from hitting the ground, but it had closed because hydraulic power was lost with the engines off. The plane spent a few hours in the mud before being craned out and towed to the hangar later that night. The only damage was the blown tire and one broken hydraulic line (from hitting the mud).

The airplane had landed a little left, with the right tire on the centerline. The recently painted runway centerline was smooth and wet from rain, which had created a near-frictionless surface. As the brakes were applied, the right

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tire skidded and rotated more slowly than the others. When it hit the tarmac again, the tire bull’s-eyed and, on its next rotation, blew.

What could I have done differently? I had not briefed what to do with a blown tire, nor had I even considered addressing the possibility. I had thought of pulling the parking brake earlier, which probably would have blown the other tire, but it might have stopped the airplane on the runway. I didn’t pull the parking brake because I didn’t know what would happen; I thought I had the aircraft under control. After a little study and talking to others after the fact, I know the option of pulling the brake is preferred to an aircraft departing the prepared surface.

I could have made sure I was on centerline before testing the brakes. As soon as we knew

we had the blown tire, we should have told tower, instead of just calling the crash crew.

No flight is ever just an ordinary event. We were too confident nothing could go wrong. Fortunately, the damage was minimal, and no one was hurt. Complacency now is a word I use in the ORM portion of the brief. I also try to brief all the weather contingencies. I quiz myself on things that might go wrong but aren’t emergencies that we regularly practice or study. Seldom does anything in our business go as planned. You always should prepare for and brief to the unexpected.✈

Lt. Metz flies with VAQ-141.

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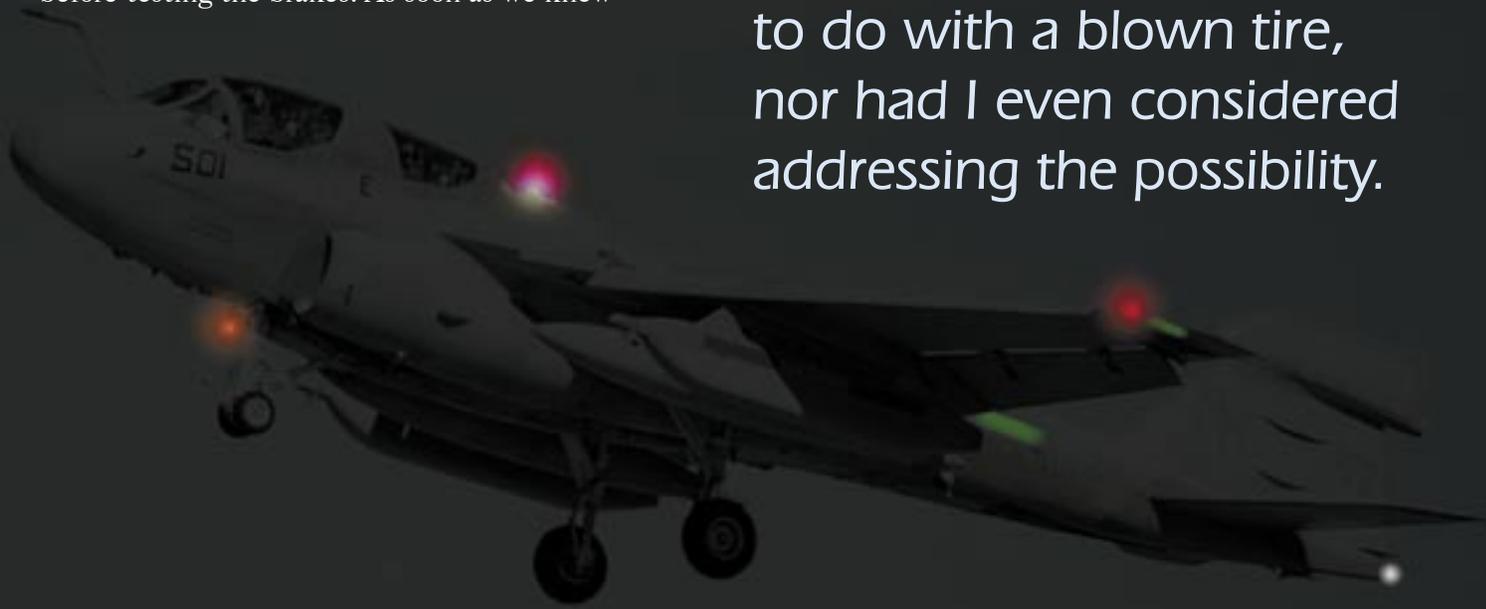


Photo by Matthew J. Thomas. Modified.