

Hook 43,



By Capt. David Palm, USMC

I promised myself if I ever wrote an *Approach* article, it would not start out, “It was a ‘good deal’ cross-country.”

But it does. The plan was to take a Prowler from Cherry Point to Miramar for an airshow. The trip was funded, and all we had to do was show up with an aircraft to be used as a static display. I was seven months out of the FRS Cat. I pilot syllabus, and I was going on the road for the first time in the mighty Warpig.

Not to worry, though, because I had the XO as my ECMO-1. He was a former MAWTS instructor, had been flying Prowlers for seemingly forever, and he could pull me out of any scrape I might get into. Like all best-laid plans, however, this one soon developed complications. The XO, who is a decent guy underneath his gruff exterior, was having a hard time finding another JO willing to come along and round out our crew. It was the day before our departure,



You're on Fire

and still we had not found another body. Not a problem; I had a buddy from the FRS in our sister squadron, who always was willing to jump on a deal, good or bad. A quick trip down the hall, and we were in business.

Upon my arrival back in the squadron spaces, I found another problem had reared its ugly head. The rumor floating around was some malcontent had decided to supplement his military paycheck with a little sideline pharmaceutical business, and the XO had to stay and work the damage-control parties. I quickly made the rounds of the squadron offices and managed to talk another FRS classmate of mine into spending a weekend at San Diego.

When Thursday morning came, I couldn't have been happier: three JOs on the road, heading for an airshow in San Diego. The brief, pre-flight, and first leg were uneventful. We stopped at Tinker AFB just long enough to get fuel and

soon were racing the sun and crew day toward MCAS Yuma.

A quick word about our aircraft's configuration. We were carrying four drop-tanks, which was a slightly unusual configuration for the Prowler but made for easier fuel planning. My intent was to land at Yuma and only take internal fuel, leaving the drops empty for the short hop over the hill to Miramar.

After landing at Yuma, I handed the ground crew my fuel card, headed into base ops to file, and checked weather for the final leg. In my rush to refile, I forgot to brief the ground crew on my plan just to take internal fuel. Arriving back at the jet, I checked the fuel slip and noticed that it had been topped off. We now had full internal fuel and four full drop-tanks for a 20-minute flight. Not a problem; we just would recheck the takeoff and abort numbers.

A few minutes later, we had launched and



were turning west. Leveling off at 16,000, I turned on the dumps and watched the fuel gauge tick down. Overhead El Centro, I secured the dump switches for a minute while ECMO-1 and I made some quick calculations of our on-deck fuel. About this time, SoCal Approach gave us a descent and a vector toward the initial for runway 24R at Miramar. I went to override on the tank-press switch, turned back on the dumps, and pulled the power to idle for the descent. Passing through 6,000 feet, I resecured the dumps, went back to norm on the tank pressurization, and made more fuel calculations—our on-deck fuel was 14,000 pounds. Combined with an aircraft empty weight of 34,000 pounds, we had a gross weight of 48,000 pounds. Max weight for a normal landing is 45,500 pounds, but NATOPS allows minimum-rate-of-descent landings up to 51,000 pounds. Our situation wasn't optimum, but we would be within limits.

As we approached the initial for 24R, we switched-up tower and heard traffic being stacked up north of the field, holding for our arrival. ECMO-1 struggled to find a space between tower transmissions to get in a call to tell them we were in their airspace. Somewhere between the numbers and midfield, we were cleared for a left break on 24R and a landing on 24L. As I rolled out of the break, ECMO-1 had the field diagram out and told me the runway length.

Landing heavy on the 8,000-foot left runway was not as preferable as landing on the 12,000-foot right runway. We land on 8,000-foot runways every day in Cherry Point, so we elected to continue. I knew hot brakes might become an issue. My plan was to land as short as possible and to stay off of the brakes for as long as possible. I touched down about a unit fast with a red ball. Landing rollout was uneventful; we safed our seats and began to unstrap while turning off the runway.

The conversation with ground control went something like this: "Hook 43, welcome to Miramar; did you bring an oil canister with you?"

ECMO-1 and I looked at each other in bewilderment for a few seconds before I came back with, "No, we just had our oil checked today, and it was fine."

Ground control's next transmission went something

like, "Hook 43, you're cleared to taxi...Oh *#*\$! You're on fire!"

I twisted around in my seat and looked at the tail of the aircraft—it was engulfed in flames. Fuel was pouring out of the drop-tank on station No. 2 and spraying over the brakes, strut and port side of the aircraft.

Disregarding ground control's calls to hold my position, I jammed the throttles forward and picked up speed up the taxiway, trying to escape the flames. Fuel from the drop-tank poured out on the taxiway and left a burning trail behind us. After going about 4,000 feet, I saw fire trucks racing toward me. I waited until they were directly in front of the jet before I set the parking brake and secured the engines. Water and foam were spraying everywhere as I popped the canopy and rolled over the side of the jet.

The great thing about having an incident at an airshow is there are cameras and eyewitnesses everywhere. The eyewitness statements and videotape showed the fuel-air adapters on stations 2 and 5 had come unseated in flight. Dumping the fuel had created pressure that had not had a chance to bleed off. Even though my drop-tanks indicated empty, the residual fuel they contained was being vented out onto the port strut and brakes. Using the brakes on landing had heated the fuel to the ignition point.

Another Prowler squadron was on detachment nearby, and they had maintainers at Miramar within a few hours. The tires, brakes and wire bundles were replaced, and we were able to use the scorched Prowler as a static display. We flew home Monday to have a nice long talk with my skipper and to listen to the ribbing from all the other squadron JOs.

Looking back, I learned several things. First, always make sure everyone knows what your plan is, and that includes the ground crew. Second, NATOPS limits are just that—limits. The farther you stray from them, the smaller the margin of error you leave for yourself. Third, never let yourself be pressed into an uncomfortable position. A call to approach asking for a 360 to adjust gross weight might have kept my "good deal" cross-country from turning into this article. 🦅

Capt. Palm flies with VMAQ-4.