



Lost in a Hornet?

Impossible

by Lt. Curtis Carroll

I was aboard the USS *Theodore Roosevelt* (CVN71) for JTFEX, the final workup cycle before deployment. It was a standard 4 V X self-escort strike into Townsend. The weather was not that great, and we correctly assumed the “X” would equal zero. Even though the lead section was from our sister squadron, briefs had reached the “It’s SOP, any questions?” level after months and months of work-ups.

I, of course, had no questions, and being Dash 3 of the 4-plane, I was concerned primarily with the admin of getting into the Townsend Range should the lead go down.

As I walked to my jet, the weather had deteriorated to a Case II launch, but from the brief, we expected that. It was late enough in the day that we knew it would be a Case III recovery, so as always, I was thinking about the night trap as I preflighted the jet. The startup was uneventful,

except for a “radar degd.” I taxied first and set up behind the E-2C on cat 2. At launch time, when the E-2C went down, my only thought was, “Oh, well, there goes the control for the night.” From the brief, I didn’t think we would need it, anyway.

As I went into tension, I heard the flight check in and get an alpha check on comm 2. I was too busy to read the range and bearing to bullseye as the holdback broke and off I went.

Launching first has advantages and disadvantages. The obvious disadvantage is fuel. The later you launch, the more play-gas you have. On the other hand, as the first one off, you don’t have to worry about the rendezvous because you set the circle and everyone joins on you. Let’s make that mindset-mistake number 1. I checked in with Strike and was cleared, “sweet, sweet.” With the E-2C down, there was no one else to check in with, so I did the standard combat checks, got



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some gas overhead (in the goo, always fun), and proceeded to the rendezvous circle.

On my way to cap, my wingman told me on comm 2 that he would be down and not to expect him. I thought, "I wish I had known before I tanked, so I could have taken his gas." (Nice lead, huh?) Anyway, I finally popped up through the weather around 15K and set myself up for the rendezvous.

Several items caught my attention while I waited for others to join on me. First, I had no A/A TACAN. I double-checked my kneeboard card to make sure the switchology was correct. I figured it was probably a late launch and no one was up yet as I started dealing with the radar. With a bunch of "C's" on the display, I checked the winds-aloft page and noticed a staggering 280 degrees at 110 knots. I figured a quick step to "wide" should handle some of those as I started concentrating on

setting the correct rendezvous circle with such heinous winds. While this was going on, I decided to switch up the ship's TACAN just to see where I was in relation to the marshal stack.

When all I received was a spinning needle, something should have rung out loudly, but it didn't. I figured I was out of range, and I would get a lock when I got closer to the ship. Plus, I had waypoint zero, and the brief said the ship would be mod-locked. Convincing myself that nothing was wrong would be mindset-mistake number 2.

So, with nothing else to do, I double-checked the route and TOT on the HSI, and quietly waited on cap for everyone to find and join on me. As it started getting close to push time, I began to worry.

Just about the time I threw out, "Check yardstick" on comm 2, the flight lead asked, "Chevy Three, where are you?" Similar to the feeling you get when a flight instructor asks you what are you doing, my head exploded while I tried to figure that one out. I coolly replied, "Zero-Nine-Zero for eight miles from CAP," and hoped that would be the end of it. Unfortunately, that was just the beginning.

Lead's reply was dreadful: "No, you're not."

After some additional comm and a check of the CAP lat-long, it was push time, and off they went. Having never joined, and with no A/A TACAN, one would probably knock it off and start figuring out where they were. Not me. I pushed as a single, one minute late. I figured I would get radar on them in front of me and could join them on the route. Plus, I was a section lead, could bomb as a single, and wanted to see Townsend. With no OPFOR, this was only an admin drill, and I certainly had the I-can-hack-it attitude.

Go ahead, say it with me: mindset mistake number 3. Even though I had been at mil the entire route, I never joined or found the lead section on radar. I heard both aircraft in the lead section call tally target and seconds later, "Miller Time," and all I saw was a blanket of white clouds beneath me. This was not good. Not only had I been traveling toward a violation, I had been doing it as fast as I could. When I heard the "Miller Time," I was officially worried.

After several mindset-mistakes leading me into this box, I did what any common-sense aviator would do: I made a hard 180, and decided it was time to get back to the ship. I quickly checked in with Strike, admitting I did not have a TACAN.

Strike gave me what turned out to be a very bad piece of information.

"Four Oh Four, radar contact, three one zero for forty-five. Switch marshal. No joy, pogo." Ironically, it matched close enough to waypoint zero that I put the reciprocal on the nose and started flying home. I think you know by now that I was not headed toward the ship, but farther away from it.

Next, I told marshal about my plight and said I was unable to marshal because I had no TACAN. And that was the final straw. Marshal could not hear me, and I could not hear marshal. I was in the box every aviator warns not to get into. And to top it off, that box was closing at a pace equal to the setting of the sun. I switched back to Strike, and would you believe it, they did not have me on radar anymore.

As everyone got involved, I started a premature climb out of the box when the lead aircraft of our division started for my position. I thought that was a great idea. He would find me, get me beneath the cloud deck on a section approach, and I could still make dinner. Deciding to stay below 18K for fear of a violation, all comms were now being relayed through lead to the ship.

I was told to check aircraft position on the HSI, then to turn left turn, then right, drive straight and level, but nothing was working. Unfortunately, none of the actions we had taken produced the "radar contact" I so desperately wanted to hear. And when Strike told the lead aircraft to contact marshal, it was time for him to recover. Being a good SERE graduate, I promptly climbed back into my box.

Analyzing my situation, I came up with the following points. I did not have comms with anybody, my TACAN was not working, I did not have any faith in my INS (don't forget the "radar degd"), it was getting dark, and fuel was finally becoming an issue. There was only one thing left to do. I squawked 7700, started a bingo profile headed 270, and continually switched up all the East Coast TACANs in my divert pack. Surely I would be able to find a divert. Also, I was happy to remember the lead section saw land on their bombing run, meaning the weather was only over the Atlantic Ocean.

Climbing through FL 240 on what I thought at the time was a 270 heading, I heard, "Aircraft Four Oh Four, Bear." It was our E-2C controller. Apparently, the next event was airborne, and most

importantly, so was its Hawkeye. A couple of IFF flashes later and I heard, “Radar contact, one hundred and sixty nautical miles south of mom.” And though I did not want to hear the rest, it came as no surprise to me. “Your signal divert, three four zero degrees for one hundred and ninety-five nautical miles.”

While on the bingo profile at 40K, I had some time to think. Still flying off the compass in the HUD, it took a couple of heading calls from the E-2C to correct to a direct course to Cherry Point. After the third call, the light bulb clicked on, and I finally started flying off the wet compass. A com-



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parison of the wet compass to the HUD showed a 40-degree difference. So, initially after checking in with Strike and putting a 130-degree heading on the nose, I was actually headed 170 degrees. Well, that explains me ending up so far south of mother. The rest of the profile went as advertised, the coast was

CAVU, and I was ecstatic to receive Cherry Point’s TACAN approximately 16 nm from the field. I had the field in sight and landed with just under 2K of gas (not a fun place to be in a Hornet, particularly at night). Once on deck and in the T-line, I checked the approach plate’s airport diagram, typed in the lat-long, and updated my system. The INS drift was 329/147.5 nm. Those numbers tell the final story.

Obviously, my ship alignment was bad. I rejected the update, ran a ground alignment, got a full bag of gas, called the ship, and asked for my overhead time (you have to at least make an effort, right?). The ship decided not to take me back, and I ended up with a night on the beach to think about the events that got me there.

The next morning, after a 20-minute Hollywood shower, I called the ship, got the exact PIM, and headed out into a blanket of undercast again. This time, however, my HUD matched my wet compass, I had the TACAN on deck, but certainly was not confident in it and had a full bag of gas. My mission: find the ship.

I checked in with Giant Killer and reported, “Sweet lock—no, not really—sweet comm,” and switched to Strike. They assured me I was radar contact and passed me off to marshal. I had plenty of time and fuel, so I drove straight at waypoint zero, and approximately 15 miles from the ship, I received the TACAN. Complaining to marshal about my weak TACAN, they offered radar vectors. I followed the vectors closely, adjusted gross weight, and recovered aboard the ship.

This would not be a complete *Approach* article without some lessons learned. First, even if you are the first one launched, if no one is joining on you, chances are you are not in the right place. This was not EMCON, and even if it was, there comes a time to ‘fess up and find a wingman.

Second, if there is no organic controlling agency with radar contact and you feel lost, switch to a civilian agency and get help. This is a luxury we have during work-ups that may not be available in other parts of the world.

Finally, the biggest lesson I learned was this: do not let your I-can-hack-it-myself attitude outweigh the safe thing to do. In my case, it was simply to ask for help. In a single-seat cockpit, it may save your life. 🇺🇸

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