# Nothing Holding Us Back—Really

By Ltjg. Matt Wilkening

Fifteen hours had passed since my first man-up of the day, and I was tired. I waited in my Viking for the Hornet in front of me to get his cat shot and get out of the way. I still needed four night traps to complete my carrier qualification (CQ). As I glanced at my experienced rightseater, I stifled a yawn and got a look that said, "Just get us aboard quickly, nugget. I'm tired and hungry."

Our S-3B squadron was in the midst of a short at-sea period to carrier qual our pilots. We had flown that morning from NAS Jacksonville to USS *George Washington* (CVN 73), which was hanging out within spitting distance of its home base of Norfolk ("bingo on the ball" for my Hornet buddies). The brief for our two-hour flight had been at 0730, and it was now 2300, two-and-a-half hours after I was scheduled to have landed. All flight events were running late. But, as carrier aviators know, the only thing a CQ schedule is good for is to tell you what definitely will not happen.

We crossed the JBD, took tension, and got our cat shot—seemingly without incident. Not until I raised the gear on our climb-out did I notice something was not right. First, I did not feel the solid "thunk, thunk, thunk" that usually accompanies a change in landing-gear configu-

Photo by PH2 James H. Watson. Modified.

ration. Second, the gear indicators showed two up-and-locked for the mains and barber pole for the nose gear. Most obvious of all, though, the bright red light in the gear handle did not go out after the usual 15 seconds. I told my COTAC about the gear, and we agreed there was a nose-gear problem. We began to troubleshoot.

The first thing we tried was the standard fix: Cycle the gear handle. The gear went down normally but had the same problem on retraction. We decided to put down the gear and leave them there. With the possibility of unsafe landing gear, we weren't going to climb to marshal and shoot the CV-1 approach as briefed. We told departure control of our problem and focused on how to get our gear inspected in accordance with NATOPS procedures.

Departure said our launch bar had broken off on the cat shot. We later found out that, instead of leaving something behind, we actually had taken the holdback bar with us—still attached to 702's nose gear.

Paddles agreed to take us on a low approach for a visual inspection of our gear. Getting priority handling is unusual for an S-3, so we enjoyed the 10-mile hook in front of our pointy-nosed brothers. My "on and on" approach resulted in the expected waveoff when paddles observed two-and-a-half feet of metal hanging from our nose gear. Departure ordered us to squawk emergency and divert to NAS Oceana; they obviously did not want to recover us aboard ship with stray pieces of metal hanging from our landing gear. The uniqueness of our problem caused minor confusion because there isn't a NATOPS procedure for a holdback bar failing to detach. We followed NATOPS procedures as if our launch bar had failed to retract.

The dirty bingo to NAS Oceana took one hour and was only called a bingo because we flew the profile. We had enough gas to have made the trip three times without refueling—even with the 30-knot headwind. Our only added problem was fatigue, which again reared its ugly head after the initial damaged-aircraft adrenaline rush had worn off. Though I found myself setting up an approach into a 20-knot crosswind at an unfamiliar airfield, in an aircraft with possibly damaged landing gear, my main concern was to stay awake.

With a minimal rate of descent, I landed past the arresting gear. I used the entire runway length (the long-field gear was stripped) to minimize using the brakes. Fortunately, the holdback fitting managed to stay attached throughout our 100-plus-mile trip from *George Washington*, as well as our 8,000 feet of landing rollout. By 0030 (17 hours after my first man-up), my COTAC and I were awaiting a tow at the end of the runway—one last precaution against the possibility of damaged gear.

Bright and early the next morning, representatives from the air wing inspected and removed the holdback bar from our aircraft. They discovered the holdback bar was the wrong size and shape. Further investigation found that the *GW* had only three S-3 holdback bars in its entire inventory that correctly fit. Our bar had stayed attached to the aircraft because it had popped out of the holdback assembly, instead of shearing the bolt. Of the many possible outcomes from this situation—most involving quick ejections—ours was a remarkably tame way to discover a dangerous problem. As one crusty chief working in base ops told me, "I've been with Navy air for 20 years and never seen anything like that." Wow! It only took three years for me to witness one.

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In retrospect, I would not have cycled the gear back up after seeing three-down-and-locked indications. I should have given more consideration to my fatigue and gotten some sleep after my day CQ. Carrier qualifications probably are the most difficult evolution a carrier and air wing accomplishes; expect them to be usually long and drawn out, and be prepared.

Ltjg. Wilkening flies with VS-31