

# Blue-Water Follies

by Lt. Brian Becker

“Ninety-nine delta easy, report tank-plus-two with position in the pattern.”

Not exactly the words the ship and air-wing leadership wanted to hear with the blue-water certification process underway. Catapult four could not be wrapped; the shuttle was stuck forward, making it impossible to land aircraft.

When I heard the call, I was approaching abeam with 5,000 pounds of fuel remaining, well above the tank state of 3,500. My wingman, a nugget who had joined the squadron one week before COMPTUEX, was 400 pounds above my state, and we were fat. The boss assured us it would be fixed in five minutes, so I wasn't worried.

After my third trip around the pattern, I began to wonder what type of minutes the boss was referring to. It had been 12 minutes since the original delta-easy call. The pilot in the first aircraft, a Tomcat, called tank-plus-two. “Roger that one zero five, your tanker seven zero three. Seven zero three, set the hawk.” The boss talked to the two together, and the Tomcat pilot reported plugged and receiving.

Waving off for the fourth time, I noticed the catapult crew was still working feverishly on cat 4. I called tank-plus-two and continued around the pattern. A minute later, my wingman reported tank-plus-two. The boss, with a recommendation from the tower rep, set the hawk for my wingman, and he tanked. All five aircraft in the pattern were below tank-plus-two. Two were plugged and receiving and the other three were reporting tank-plus-one. “Ninety-nine Factory [*the airwing tactical callsign*], report bingo-plus-one.” The Hornet reported a bingo state of 3.3. That sounded high, so I checked M9 (my divert waypoint) and saw an 85 nm divert. Using my NATOPS bingo cheatsheet, I computed a 2.7.

“Tower, three zero five, I'm showing bingo two point seven.”

“Roger that three zero five, we are checking.” Thirty seconds later, the boss came up again: “Ninety-nine Hornet, bingo two point seven.”

I approached the abeam, called bingo-plus-one, and set myself up for landing, just in case the deck opened. Unfortunately, the crowd still was in the landing area.

“Three zero five, your signal tank, join your playmate,” the boss called.

I saw my wingman coming off the tanker, raised my flaps, and accelerated to 250 knots for the rendezvous.

“Seven zero two, say your airspeed,” I called. I was at 250 knots with 60 knots of closure as I underran, put the board out, and tried to saddle in behind.

“Seven zero two is a sour tanker,” the boss said. What to do now? I was 400 pounds above bingo, 3,000 feet at the abeam, no tanker, and a fouled deck.

“Tower, three zero five, state my intentions.” I always wanted to say that.

“Charlie,” the boss said.

“I can make it from here,” I replied.

“Roger that, the pattern is yours,” the boss said.

I deconflicted with my wingman on the aux radio and brought down the aircraft. I was at 2,000 feet, in a deep 90, with a high rate of descent. I called the ball and felt like I made it.

“Wave off, wave off, fouled deck.” You have got to be kidding me! All that for a waveoff?

“Three zero five, tower, the pattern is yours. Tomcat approaching the abeam, give way.”

OK, last chance, I thought. Climbing through 100 feet, I started my turn and leveled off at 400 feet.



“Tomcat, watch your altitude!” the boss exclaimed. Although we had each other in sight, I am sure it did not look that way from the air boss’ perspective. I was level, 400 feet abeam, with 200 pounds to spare. I flew my best 400-foot pattern, intercepted glide slope at the 45, and landed with an OK 2-wire. My fuel gauge showed 50 pounds over bingo.

I learned some lessons.

First, constantly update your bingo-field information. The Hornet has a very reliable, user-friendly INS. It shows bearing and distance to any waypoint with a press of a button. When I return to the ship, day or night, I have the divert waypoint displayed, and I double-check it against what marshal is reporting. Our squadron has a cheatsheet that displays NATOPS bingo numbers in 10 nm increments at varying drag counts and headwinds. Not only can this get you another trip around the pattern (bag ex), but, more importantly, it can keep you from unknowingly flying below bingo fuel.

Second, be assertive and take charge when necessary. I knew the initial bingo number was wrong, fixed it, and gave everyone at least one more trip around the pattern.

Third, take tower-rep duties seriously and be prepared for the worst. The rep made a great decision by sending my wingman, a new pilot in the squadron, to the tanker first. Otherwise, he would have been the one to join on a sour tanker, which might have confused him and forced him to divert.

Finally, and most importantly, don’t exceed your capabilities. I pressed the envelope, got aboard, and helped the air wing get its blue-water certification. 

Lt. Becker flies with VFA-15.

You have to be kidding me! All that for a waveoff?

