

by Ltjg. Charles Paquin

Everyone has a “There I was story. Mine takes place in the training command. I was heading out to the boat for the first time, confident as ever. My lead was a senior pilot, and this added to my feeling that all was well in the world. My bouncing grades were good, and I knew how to handle the jet.

As we made our way out to the ship, we dodged a thunderstorm or three. We were held overhead for an hour while the ship tried to get the SAR helo off the deck. Finally, with our fuel gauges steadily moving toward bingo, and with no chance to get the SAR bird airborne, we decided to head back to the beach.

I did my feet-dry checks as I had in the trainer many times before. I had heard of pilots blowing tires on the runway because they failed to get their anti-skid switch turned on. The T-45 isn’t very forgiving on a wet runway with carrier-pressurized tires and the anti-skid off, and that was not how I wanted to make a name for myself.

The weather had continued to build, and the destination field was now IFR. We had briefed a PAR approach if the break wasn’t open, so we flexed to our backup plan. The lead would go to one-half flaps and speed brakes in, while the wingman (me) would take separation on final by going to full flaps, speed-brakes out and fly on-speed. I stayed in tight parade because we were in and out of clouds and about to enter an overcast layer.

As we followed vectors for our PAR, the approach controller told us to our dirty up at



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about 10 miles out. When I saw the lead’s flaps begin to move, I went to full flaps as briefed. Much to my surprise, lead did not fly out ahead of me. He had also gone to full flaps, boards out and had slowed to on-speed. I was still flying off his wing and couldn’t build separation.



Landing

I was confused. I expected the lead to brief me on our new game plan. The wait seemed like an eternity. But I was only a student and was flying on the wing of an experienced aviator who had an experienced instructor in his back seat. I kept quiet until we started receiving glide-slope calls. When I finally called the lead, I asked, “Understand you will drop me off?”

Lead replied, “No, stay on my wing, and we’ll land together.”

My comfort level dropped to rock bottom. Instead of questioning his decision to fly a section approach and landing, which wasn’t briefed, in adverse weather, I remained quiet and prepared for the landing and rollout.

Knowing the runway was wet, I checked once again to ensure my anti-skid was on. Like a good student, I did what I was told and stayed on his wing in tight parade all the way to touchdown. I was cautious with my brakes, and we stayed in formation for the entire rollout and taxi back to the line.

I breathed a sigh of relief. Back in the debrief room, no one mentioned the non-standard approach and landing. I walked out knowing that something didn’t seem right, but was too new to put my finger on it. It took me a few days to realize how close to disaster I had been. This was a perfect example of allowing rank to remain in the cockpit. I didn’t question lead about his decision. After all, he had thousands of flight hours and an instructor in his trunk. I was just a flight student. Looking back, I should have questioned him. Moreover, I should have explained to him that this was not standard and

that I would prefer to pick up a new squawk and fly my own approach.

The instructor in the back of the lead’s jet should have also called the lead on his decision to do a section landing.

If something doesn’t seem right, it probably isn’t. Regardless of rank or experience, ask questions and speak up if a situation arises that you are uncomfortable with or feel is being handled incorrectly. 

Ltjg. Paquin flies with VAQ-132.

If you have questions about approach criteria for aircraft in formation, check OPNAV 3710.7R, para 5.1.12.6 on page 5-12.—Ed.