

# Just Park It, We Can Walk from Here

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by Lt. Mike MacNichol

**S**o far, the week had been painful for the squadron, thanks to numerous aircraft maintenance problems. We were doing night FCLPs in the Land of the Rising Sun, at the outpost of Atsugi. For those of you who haven't bounced here, the hazards are numerous and potentially deadly. Blinding strobe lights and bonfires, loads of other jets and prop aircraft, and a less-than-helpful tower (read "uncontrolled," and the subject of numerous hazreps) all provide fodder for ORM.

Our brief was thorough (as it always is for the seventh bounce period of the week), and we walked when the jet was ready. Earlier that day, the jet had come back down with the flaps barberpoled and stuck at an intermediate position of approximately 25 degrees. Our maintainers assured us the jet was good to go after they replaced a flap brake valve that afternoon. We also knew we would have a chance to verify their work during the pilot's flight-control checks. Everything worked 4.0 as we started our taxi. Halfway to the hold short, however, the pilot noticed the light for the flap indicator had burned out. We discussed pressing on and used a flashlight to view the

indicator. Then the taxi light burned out. Because the night was dark and rainy, we decided to taxi back to the line for some quick repairs.

After we shut down (to swap the taxi light) and restarted, we had another chance to check the flaps. Everything worked fine. We got airborne, turned to base, and went dirty. Lo and behold, the flaps would not travel past the 20-degree position! Everything else came down fine. Of course, the failed indicator light was frustrating our efforts to read the indication.

Language barriers became a factor, as the long-winded Japanese controller tried to vector us to final. When we finally got our request in, there was the usual delay and extra comm until he understood the nature of our problem, our request for altitude block, and an area to troubleshoot. We were glad when we were transferred to an Air Force controller, who gave us exactly what we wanted (5,000 feet and a radial.)

We found that the pocket checklist didn't address our problem. We checked circuit breakers but chose not to electrically lower the flaps for a couple of reasons. We knew the hydraulics were good. With the on-speed check, we figured the flaps were at least 20 degrees. The flaps were binding and further movement would aggravate the problem. Complicating our approach were still more missing lights: this time it was the indexers.

We decided to use a 20-degree-flaps approach speed, plus a couple extra knots for mom and the kids. We burned down to a comfortable weight and called the controller. They tried giving us a vector toward a thunderstorm, so we had to convince them otherwise. The approach went fine until we landed. Even though we were light, the extra speed, coupled with the wet runway and less drag, made us lean on the brakes.

"Hot brakes," signaled the checker, followed by a signal to proceed to the hot-brake area. The brakes not only were hot, they were fused, which left us stuck in the middle of the taxiway. The checker told us to shut down and called for a tow. Continuing the theme of the evening, the freeze plug on the starboard main blew, and the right tire deflated. Discouraged, we made the 50-yard walk back to the hangar.

We discussed calling ground via landline to ensure they knew where we had left our dark jet, but, figuring they could see it from their vantage point, decided against it. This turned out to be a poor choice, as CAG and the XO of one of the Hornet squadrons almost taxied into it. Ground obviously didn't know there was a Prowler there, and our skipper wasn't too happy.

Never assume, and always communicate your intentions—especially if they aren't standard—to controllers. 

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Photo-composite illustration by Allan Amen