

I Can't Stop This Thing, or Aim for the Guy in the Tractor!

by Lt. Benjamin Cook

It was shaping up to be another great day in the Persian Gulf. I was starting my second week of operational flying and was getting comfortable with flying around the ship—at least during the day. Because I was not flying with my normal crew, I made sure the brief was especially thorough, including what I wanted to hear from them at points throughout the flight, and what they could expect to hear from me. I did not belabor any of the carrier emergencies, but I covered them in the same detail that I always did.

We suited up and walked to the aircraft an hour before launch to allow plenty of time for a thorough preflight and to troubleshoot. During the preflight, I noticed a

moderate amount of hydraulic fluid in the port wheelwell. I called the plane captain over. He told me the fluid came from over-servicing the hydraulic system, and the jet was good to go.

We manned up and started the jet without any problems. The checklists and plane-captain checks went fine, and before I knew it, we had pulled chocks, armed the seats, and were taxiing toward cat 1.

As we taxied, I got two good brake checks (one for the normal system, and one for the emergency system.) When we passed the JBD, we got the signal to spread the wings. I taxied just a bit forward, then stopped and waited for the wings to come down so we could finish the takeoff checks. I was looking out the port side at my wing when my COTAC tried to stow the gust lock and lock the wings in place. I heard him exclaim something that made me think something was not right.

By the time I had looked back inside, he had already pulled the gust lock back up. There were no abnormal indications. When I asked what had happened, he said the No.1 hydraulic system's pressure had dropped to zero when he tried to lock the wings down. We decided to try once more, and this time I watched as the pressure gauge dropped toward zero, and the hyd pressure light came on.



When we raised the gust lock, all indications returned to normal. We decided that we were down, and signaled to the flight deck that we needed to be spun off the cat. When we tried folding the wings, they began to ratchet and the hyd pressure on the No. 1 system moved around a bit.

We then signaled for the wings to be folded externally. I watched one of the flight-deck crew go around to my port wheelwell, then the deck crew folded the wings from the outside. All caution lights went out, and everything appeared normal in the cockpit.

Our yellowshirt signaled we were going to taxi forward then spin off the cat. We proceeded forward, then did a tight 180 on the bow of the ship, and taxied back down cat 1, toward the island. As we passed the spot on the cat where we were sitting when we tried to spread the wings, both my COTAC and I noticed quite a lot of fluid on the deck. About the same time, my skipper, who happened to be sitting in one of the jets waiting to go off cat 1, asked us how our brakes felt. In our cockpit, we did another quick check, noticed that our emergency brake accumulator was still fully charged, and our No. 1 hyd system was still working.

“Everything seems OK,” I replied, right about the time they stopped us by elevator 1. From the signals I was getting from our yellowshirt, I gathered we were going to be pushed back onto the elevator and out of the way.

While we were sitting there, holding the brakes, my worst nightmare happened: The brakes failed. Suddenly, my feet were flat on the deck. I tried pumping them once, felt no resistance, and threw the hook down. At this point, I experienced time compression. I remember switching to the emergency system, and at the same time telling my crew we had lost the brakes.

My COTAC immediately reported we had lost brakes over tower freq. By the time he had finished his transmission, I was already looking for something to run into. The deck crew had not noticed my hook was down, and instead of doing what I had always been led to believe—that they would throw everything they had at your aircraft, possibly including a blueshirt—the crew was moving my first target (a towbar) out of harm’s way. But by now, the yellowshirt who had been directing me, had figured out what was going on and began signaling me to follow his directions. My COTAC shouted for me to follow him and turn to the right.

To this day, I don’t know how we managed to squeeze between an E-2 that was turning and a Hornet, but somehow we made a hard right and headed toward the landing area.

Just as we started to come out of the turn, I got the shock of my life: the Tomcat that was hot on cat 3 got shot right in front of us. When we got out into the landing area, I jinked around the hole where the catapult talkers sit. I was aiming for the JBD that was still up from the Tomcat’s launch. Of course, that would have been too easy. It retracted before I could get to it. Oh yeah, by now we were picking up quite a bit of speed. After all, both engines were turning, and there was a lot of wind over the deck. All I could do was look down the deck for my next target of opportunity, a tractor towing an FA-18.

I steered my S-3 right for that piece of yellow gear, all the time yelling to the driver to bail out—as if he could hear me. His thought was to save the Hornet he was towing, so he began to back up, and I just adjusted my turn to keep tracking right at him.

Just as I thought I was finally going to hit something and come to a stop, the jet began to slow and came to a complete stop. Remember how I dropped the hook? Well, it worked fine, engaging the 4-wire in reverse. I stopped less than 5 feet away from the tractor and its lucky airman-driver. The deck crew chocked and chained my jet, and we shut down, but not before I proceeded to dump what little hydraulic fluid I had left in my system into the landing area.

We handled this emergency exactly as briefed. Everyone has his own way of briefing, but most people usually say the same thing. My crew’s actions had no surprises; the biggest surprise was the actions of the deck crew. Obviously, you can’t count on them to know exactly when you lose your brakes (they can’t all see your hook), so don’t expect them to be throwing everything they are carrying to stop you. I never dreamed that I would have a yellowshirt sprinting ahead of me to help direct me through the maze of the flight deck.

To this day, nobody can say why I had nosewheel steering but no brakes. I had lost all the fluid in my No. 1 system and should have lost all my utility systems, including brakes and nosewheel steering. 

Lt. Cook flies with VS-21.