

Complacency's Evil Twin Brother

by Lt. Tim Buller

Over and over, it gets drilled into our heads: Mundane and expected tasks can sneak up and bite us when we least expect it. But we seldom discuss complacency's evil twin brother: overconfidence. How many times have you let your 2,000 hours in type dictate the maneuvers you fly or how aggressively you handle your aircraft? My guess is more than you probably should have.

One crisp November morning proved to be an eye-opening experience for me. I had just returned from a three-week sabbatical of leave and LSO school. I jumped into the cockpit for a much-needed, back-in-the-saddle hop. I'd completed a closed-book EP exam, and with all of 820 flight hours behind me, I strutted to the plane like a war-hardened cruise veteran, mulling over the three previous weeks. After all, I'd been flying the E-2 for almost two years now; nothing could take me by surprise.

Man-up and engine start seemed to go fine, but a hint of insecurity lingered in the back of my mind. I could tell my scan was unusually slow, and the checks were taking longer than normal. I continued to rush the checks, hoping no one

would notice, and trusted sheer repetition to get me to the hold-short. Takeoff and climbout passed uneventfully. However, my airwork was plagued with inconsistencies, missed radio calls, and even missed altitude assignments. As I slowly but surely began to rebuild my airmanship skills, my headwork deteriorated. Although I never exceeded airframe limitations during any maneuvers, my flying was littered with forgotten procedures and substandard practices. Without the help of a good copilot, I may have banished my Hawkeye to the hangar bay for unnecessary repairs. I continued to pat myself on the back for my newly regained flying skills, as my decision-making flushed itself down the toilet.

The call was finally made to RTB, and I asked the back-enders if they were ready for the break. I heard an emphatic "Yes!" Then, "You better make it a good one!" That's all I needed to hear. We requested a carrier break and scorched into the overhead like only a Hummer can—at 300 knots.

How could I tell them, "No, it's been awhile, I'm going to go in at 1,700 feet and 250 for the normal break?" I've done the carrier break hundreds of times; how could this be any different?

As I snapped the plane on its side and ripped the power levers to idle, I knew right away I was merely hanging on for the ride. The plane sloshed and skidded underneath me and I remember thinking, as I looked at my rudder ball almost fully displaced to the right, “Wow, I’ve never seen a ball that far out there!” By the time I looked outside again and cross-checked my instruments, I was at 60 degrees angle of bank, 15 degrees nose low and at 400 feet! I decided enough was enough, leveled the wings, pulled the nose up, and made an extremely ugly break look even worse. I calmly climbed back to pattern altitude, dirtied up, and landed with a vocal copilot sounding off in the right seat.

I never gave a second thought to the actual purpose of my flight, namely, to get back in the saddle. I should have concentrated on reacquainting myself with the tremendous responsibility my job entails and refurbishing my rusty flying skills. Had I focused on the job at hand and understood my limitations, I never would have placed four other lives at risk... or stayed up half the night writing this article. 🦅

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