

Welcome to the Fleet, Have

by Lt. Nick Green

Ten days out of the Prowler FRS and I was scheduled to participate in a once-in-a-lifetime bagex for three days, here in the Puget Sound, just a few minutes flying time from NAS Whidbey Island. As the new guy, I was scheduled as the priority player for the first two days of this good deal, then they'd let me start working on my LSO qual on day three.

I guess they didn't trust me to fly during the tiger cruise. No problem, I still was psyched. My first four hops in the fleet were bouncing at Whidbey, and my fifth was the bagex. All I had to worry about was flying the ball and building experience around the boat. Could it get any better? Well, yes, they could hot-pump us on the flight deck for more traps, but the ship said no pumping gas with tigers on board. We would get one bag of gas, and when we hit hold-down we would be sent home.

On the morning of the first day of carrier ops, our ready room was packed for the brief. There were two overhead times and three squadrons involved, which put four Prowlers in the air for my event. Just prior to the brief, our ops department got a call from another CVN in the Sound, asking for an

airpower demonstration for their tiger cruise (can you believe it?). Eight loud-and-low Pratt & Whitney engines should do it. We planned a division fly-by in a diamond formation to please the crowd, maybe twice if gas permitted, then on to the bagex. I really was psyched.

We walked and started on time, with one jet dropping out of the fly-by for gas reasons. Three Prowlers still would look pretty good with Victoria, B.C., and the Olympic Peninsula as a backdrop. The launch and rendezvous were well-executed, and, with the weather CAVU, we could see both CVNs when we reached 2,000 feet. With my new CO in the lead, we performed three fly-bys for a deck full of spectators, and, in the words of the air boss, we "were the highlight of the tiger cruise."

The division lead then turned his attention to getting us overhead, with as much gas as possible,



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for our real objective. We immediately were given a charlie signal and headed down to the break at max trap. So far so good.

Everything went well until my fourth trip to the catapult, where a final checker noticed a hydraulic leak. We were spun off the cat, and the maintainers found a problem with the starboard, flight-hydraulic pump that was small enough not to register on the cockpit gage. Meanwhile, the other Prowlers were continuing the bagex, getting down toward hold-down fuel, and then heading home, just 30 miles away. We were the last jet on the deck when maintenance cleared us for a one-time flight home. We were close to hold-down, so it wasn't a big loss. I'd already gotten three traps and the first fly-bys of my career. I still had a huge grin behind my mask. A CAVU day in the Puget Sound, in March, with two carriers asking us to help them with tiger cruises. What were the odds?

While we were preparing to launch with our weak hydraulic system, a drama began to unfold at home field. With our CO's jet safely on deck, a different squadron's Prowler blew a mainmount at the runway intersection, leaving plenty of FOD and fouling both runways. Their nosewheel

steering was disabled by the sudden turn, and they were unable to clear the intersection. We were still talking to approach control, heading toward the field at nine miles when I got the call to turn south and climb for max conserve. We were No. 2 and the other bagex Prowler ahead of us (a low-fuel one from earlier) was now so low on fuel that it was in danger. This good deal hop quickly was losing its shine.

We had 10 minutes before committing to the bingo profile to our divert field. The hydraulic leak hadn't been too much of a problem until this point; it had cost me some traps, but now it meant that if we had to divert, the aircraft would be down, awaiting maintenance. We relayed our situation to approach control, who was anxious to divert us, even asking if the CVN was suitable. Imagine that, diverting from home field *to* the boat! That was out of the question. We held out as long as possible, and, just as we got a vector south toward the divert airfield, the runway was cleared and the field reopened. We turned north, contacted tower, and landed.

Our low-fuel ops had reduced our margin of safety. That margin was tested by the unexpected closure of both runways on a CAVU day. The ground personnel were able to quickly remove the offending jet from the intersection, but, in the cockpit, it seemed to take forever.

Lt. Green flies with VAQ-140.

