

# Don't Scar the Landscape



Photo by 1st Lt. Jeff Landis

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Iwo Jima—the name conjures up black-volcanic sands and U.S. Marines raising the American flag atop Mount Suribachi, in what would become one of the most enduring images of World War II. It took over one month to capture the barely six-mile-long island, claiming over 50,000 casualties in the process.

Not just a historic island for the aircrew of Carrier Air Wing Five, Iwo Jima lies in our backyard and is our primary—though less than ideal—site for field-carrier-landing practice (FCLP). Iwo Jima has just a single runway and is located 600 miles south of the nearest divert field on Honshu. The weather patterns

can vary from CAVU conditions one hour to WOXOF the next. Iwo poses challenges unique in naval aviation. We were just over two weeks away from a major deployment and were slated to return to the famous island to ready ourselves for CV operations.

The weather was beautiful the morning we arrived. I was scheduled for two night-FCLP periods, which left the afternoon open to explore the island. I crawled around one of the thousands of tunnels honeycombing the island, then I returned to the squadron. I arrived in plenty of time before the brief to review the field diagram and approaches. The runway is 8,700 feet long, with two sets of arresting gear at both ends. The parallel taxiway is rigged with gear at either end for use in an emergency if the runway is fouled.

Since noise abatement is not an issue in the middle of the Pacific, we would fly the standard Case I pattern during the day and Case III pattern at night. This would be a welcome relief from the 1,900-foot pattern we flew in Atsugi. Over the last several months, I had become adept at flying clara passes to a cushioned landing. Could I shift gears and actually fly the ball?

The squadron LSOs were experienced at Iwo, and they gave a quick but thorough brief for our night periods. Not long before, an air-wing pilot's brakes had failed during landing roll-out. A hazrep concerning a faulty brake system and blown tires during a night FCLP period had been discussed in the last back-to-sea brief. Because of the recent brake problems, the briefer paid particular

attention to "loss of brakes and directional control." I gave little thought to losing my brakes because I never have had a brake problem. My lost-brake game plan was to power up and take the jet around for a trap.

I suited up and read the gripes in the book. I noted the last gripe, which had downed the aircraft: "Brakes initially not responsive after touchdown; regained effectiveness only after pumping brakes several times."

Our man-up and launch, directly into the Case III pattern, went fine once I adjusted to the darkness. After several passes to knock off the rust, it was time to land, hot pit, and have another go. As I made my final ball call with over 2,500 pounds of fuel remaining, the runway lights dimly illuminated, and I was cleared to full stop. I touched down on centerline.

I extended the boards, and tapped the brakes—the pedals seemed normal. Despite the runway lights, the darkness was disorienting. I felt like



Photo by Matthew J. Thomas, Modified

I was screaming down the runway while I impatiently waited for the aircraft to decelerate. At 100 knots, I programmed back stick and used the brakes but still got no reassuring deceleration.

My mind flashed back to reading the ADB. I pumped the brakes, assuming they would return. I was on brain-stem power, and the act of pumping the brakes and keeping the Hornet on centerline required all my attention. After what seemed like an eternity, the brakes remained ineffective. My situational awareness was low: My three firing neurons were incapable of comparing the runway boards with my airspeed and determining if I was able to take the jet around. I visualized the jet careening down the cliff at the end of the runway. Because I was low on gas and SA, taking it around definitely was not an option.

I released pressure on the pedals, selected emergency brakes, and got back on the binders. Initially, I didn't feel a response, so I increased pressure on the pedals. Finally, I felt the jet begin to slow. I thought I was in the clear when I felt and heard a "thud," and the jet slewed to the right. A couple seconds later, the jet stopped to the right of runway centerline.

Taking a deep, ragged breath, I told tower I had a blown tire. Five minutes later, a tow tractor manned by a Japanese ground crew had me on a taxiway. I then realized how many Hornets had been waved off in the interim; five jets still were in the pattern or climbing to high holding, two were fuel critical. The island suddenly seemed deserted. The roar of jets in the pattern, that nearly had been continuous 15 hours a day, suddenly was gone. The airfield was eerily silent. Yet, I knew five of my friends were above me, running low on fuel, and waiting for the one runway within 600 miles to reopen.

Paddles scrambled out for a quick, combat-FOD walkdown. Each minute of the walkdown seemed like an eternity, but, eventually, the runway was cleared for my friends. The airwing duty officer and the crash crews quickly coordinated for the recovery. The LSOs were

able to land everyone on the primary runway, using the arresting gear at both ends to trap aircraft landing in opposite directions. The local ground crew reset the gear as each aircraft taxied clear.

The next day, as I taxied clear of the runway after an uneventful bounce period, it was hard to ignore the 1,000-foot-long skid marks that started with 4,500 feet of runway remaining and ended with 3,500 feet remaining. What had gone wrong? I knew the Hornet's anti-skid system was disabled when emergency brakes were selected, and brake sensitivity increased significantly when the emergency brakes were actuated. As gingerly as I had tried to apply brake pressure, I still blew both main tires. The real issue was not electing to go flying again. My preflight game plan was sound: If in doubt, take it around, take a trap, and never troubleshoot a brake problem on deck.

If I had been able to reference the no-later-than numbers, I would have forced myself to look at the runway boards. I would have had plenty of time before I had to take the jet around or use the emergency brakes. Keep the no-later-than numbers in your hip pocket, and, if you happen to lose your brakes, you won't feel the need to go to GQ because you don't have the SA to make a better decision.

The air wing also learned some lessons about our primary FCLP field and its barrier capabilities. Taking a trap on a 75-foot wide, poorly illuminated taxiway, with no lens or other visual glide-slope indicator at night, may be easier said than done. This issue prompted the decision to continuously rereg the main barriers at each end of the runway.

If the weather had turned bad, or if any of the aircraft had been at a lower fuel state, Iwo Jima may have claimed more war material to add to that which still is strewn about its scarred landscape from over 50 years ago. 🇺🇸

Lt. White flies with VFA-195.