



Photos by Matthew J. Thomas. Composite.

# Rollback on

By Lt. Dave Ehredt

Blue sky filled the desert bowl of the China Lake, Calif. bombing range. Rising terrain led to mountains on the horizon in all directions. The lead aircraft pulled off the target as my pilot rolled our S-3B Viking, loaded with Rockeye, onto the bull's-eye for our last run.

I called “in hot” to the range controller, while I armed the weapon for release. The Rockeye exploded with the tremendous rumble associated with a functional weapon. Once we pulled clear of the rising terrain ahead of us, I called “off safe.”

The bowl that once was filled with blue sky now lay covered in a vast cloud of smoke and dust. We joined with the lead aircraft and began our return leg to NAS Fallon. I thought the most exciting part of our flight was over. We certainly were “off safe,” but we weren’t “home safe”—at least not yet.

In the Land of the Rising Sun, a precruise Fallon detachment does not exist for Air Wing Five. Instead, Air Wing Five squadrons send a few aviators to Fallon between spring and fall cruises to gain the experience of strike planning and execution provided by Naval Strike

Air Warfare Center. My pilot and I joined a stateside-based S-3 squadron in Fallon during the “pleasantly cool” month of July. Fallon set a record high of 104 degrees that month—it felt like a slow-bake oven.

After an exciting but uneventful bombing hop to the range at China Lake, we returned to Fallon under blue skies as Dash 2 of the section. Our only remaining interest was to take advantage of Fallon’s carrier-fan break. After receiving the fan-break signal from the lead aircraft, the pilot rolled our jet on its side and tracked the nose across the distant horizon. The lead aircraft touched down on the left side of the runway, as we rolled in the groove and finished the landing checklist. After we touched down on the runway’s right side, I looked over my right shoulder to see if the speedbrakes had extended.

“Boards on the right,” I reported.

When I returned my scan to the airspeed indicator, the flashing master-caution light grabbed my attention. I glanced at the master-caution panel.

“No. 2 fuel pressure, electric power,” I said, as I punched out the master-caution light.

# Rollout

“We’re losing the No. 2 engine,” I continued, while I cross-checked the master-caution lights with the decreasing engine-instrument indications. “Just ride it out,” I added.

The pilot’s scan returned inside the cockpit. “Roger, keep your eye on the ITT,” he replied.

I kept watching the engine instruments; within a couple of seconds, the engine temperature increased slowly.

“ITT is rising,” I said. This comment drew my pilot’s attention to the gauge. With both throttles at idle, we watched the ITT slowly rise at first, then shoot to the top of the gauge, setting off the engine-limit light on the master-caution panel. I punched out the master-caution light at the same time the pilot said, “Let’s shut down No. 2. No. 2 throttle—off,” he began.

“Roger, I’m guarding No. 1,” I responded, as the pilot pulled the No. 2 throttle past the idle-stop.

“No.2 fire-pull handle, pull,” he continued.

I reached up and pulled the No. 2 fire-pull handle; the pilot secured the No. 2 ignition switch.

---

*When I returned my scan to the airspeed indicator, the flashing master-caution light grabbed my attention.*

---

I clearly remember the pilot glancing at me while I responded to the last step. At that moment, we realized we hadn’t looked outside the cockpit since we had touched down. I had no idea where we were on the runway—if we even were on it—or how much runway we had left. I felt my stomach drop as I snapped my head forward. Fortunately, the section lead was safely clear, and we still were well centered on our half of the runway. I let out a heavy sigh of relief that got picked up on the ICS. The pilot verbalized my exact thoughts, “Thank goodness we’re still on the #&@#& runway!”

It is impossible to know how many seconds passed without the pilot or I looking outside. It certainly was enough time to have drifted near the edge of the runway, onto the other half of the runway (where the section lead had landed), or into something that did not belong on the runway. I’d like to believe my peripheral vision would have alerted me to impending danger; however, I can’t guarantee that. I was focused on securing the No.2 engine. My visual scan had broken down during a critical phase of flight: the landing rollout.

The take-away lesson is one of the most fundamental skills we learn in flight school: Maintain a visual scan inside and outside the aircraft, regardless of cockpit tasks. Don’t just fly the aircraft to touchdown; fly it to your parking spot. 

Lt. Ehredt flies with VS-21, NAF Atsugi, Japan.