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"Cleared to Land..."

By Lt. Brian Paudert and Lt. T. J. Dierks

With a storm front moving through Virginia Beach, we knew when we arrived at the squadron our good-deal, section low-level obviously wouldn't happen. Weather called for low ceilings and light precipitation throughout the morning, so we discussed a backup plan. The weather probably would prevent any AIC as well, so we decided to go out as singles and jump into the GCA-box pattern. We were flying the F-14B Tomcat with a new and improved HUD—what could go wrong?

We were cruise-experienced although the two of us had flown together only once before. We thoroughly briefed the flight and discussed what we expected from each other. Sitting at the holdshort and waiting for take-off clearance, we noticed a steady stream of GCA traffic to the left runway, with departing traffic using the right. We weren't the only ones with the box pattern as a back-up plan. After departing on the right runway, we saw that the weather was close to the forecast: a light, scattered layer around 300 feet, 500 feet broken, and multiple layers above. We were cleared into the GCA pattern and shot our first approach with no problem. We decided to fly a couple more approaches and to get on deck with plenty of gas.

Our next time around, we heard a new voice as our final controller, and he obviously was new to the job. They were having a hard time locking us up with ACLS, but we told them to try it all the way down. The controller told us to stay clean, and he would call our dirty. As we skimmed along the top of the undercast layer at 1,500 feet, both of us forgot we still didn't have our landing gear down. We quickly were brought back to reality when, at five miles and 1,500 feet, we still were clean. We lowered the gear, and the RIO told the controller.

Three miles from the field came fast as we got in the proper configuration and tried to slow to on-speed.



We heard a “start your descent” call (not standard) and realized we were high, inside of three miles, and still at 1,500 feet.

If it had been night, and we had been behind the boat, we would have been more concerned, but we were daytime, and we had lulled ourselves into complacency. We needed a seven- or eight-degree glide slope to work it back down and to have a slightly high VSI. Just inside of two miles, we heard the first “you’re above glide slope” call, followed by, “Can you make it?”

Those calls gave us a heads-up that we were a little higher than we thought, but we answered we’d make it over the runway for at least a low approach. We decided to set a four-degree glide slope and to take whatever that descent gave us. We were then cleared for a touch-

where we were cleared to land. There were two sections of Hornets waiting to depart, and the controller thought it would be faster to put one section on each runway, the left and the right. That plan would have been fine and would have worked smoothly, but the section on the left decided to do a radar-trail departure without telling the tower. The chief said he had monitored the whole situation from the tower but had misjudged the timing between the departing and landing traffic.

There are other things to consider. Why were we given clearance to land with a jet sitting on the runway? Regardless of how long the Hornet took, standard procedures should have been followed. When the tower realized the spacing wasn’t going to be enough, why weren’t we waved off? The tower owns that airspace,

Can You Make It?"

and-go on the left, which we answered with, “Roger, cleared to land on the left, three down and locked.” We broke out at 400 feet, inside of one-quarter mile, and lined up right.

As we corrected to centerline and bunted the nose, we saw something that surprised us: A Hornet was on our runway starting his take-off roll. We initiated the waveoff and told the approach controller about the conflict. Our standard climb-out instructions were to climb straight ahead on runway heading until passing 1,000 feet, then turn left to the downwind. Quick aviator geometry determined flying this route would keep us right on top of the Hornet pilot, who had no idea we were there. As we climbed toward the overcast layer, we immediately turned left to deconflict and to get separation between the jets. We both popped out on top about the same time, with about 2,000 feet between us—the Hornet never saw us.

We decided to full stop the next approach, and, this time, we were more determined to be better aviators and to pay closer attention. Our original controller was back for the next approach, and it went like clockwork.

What happened? After debriefing maintenance and getting out of our gear, there was a message from the tower chief waiting for us. He explained the problem to us and why there was a Hornet sitting on the runway

and they monitor the final control frequency. The whole situation could have been avoided if the controller or the tower chief had taken action. No one with authority made any proactive decisions, and, even when we alerted approach to the problem, their only response was, “Roger.” Also, the controllers didn’t recognize the conflict on climb-out. One situation was avoided, only to create another.

All of these issues aside, we are responsible for making decisions that directly affect our aircraft. What did we do wrong? We definitely fell behind the jet in terms of situational awareness. We were busy with other things that should not have been occupying our thoughts. Maybe these things didn’t directly come into play with the Hornet on the runway, but we weren’t doing our part to stay ahead of the jet.

Relying too much on an inexperienced controller allowed us to get way out of parameters for an approach into marginal weather. We, as aircrew, need to understand the higher state of vigilance necessary in these situations. We’ve all read enough of these stories to know complacency has no place in the cockpit, no matter who is controlling us. Our situation wasn’t at night, behind the ship, with a pitching deck, but the flight still was more interesting than it needed to be. 

Lts. Paudert and Dierks fly with VF-143.