

Hummer Dance Case I

By Ltjg. Vince Nguyen

Miscommunications during cyclic operations led to our E-2C doing what Hawkeye aircrew commonly refer to as the “Hummer Dance.” This term describes the flight of the E-2C when the carrier staff appears to endlessly drive the Hawkeye around for spacing, usually on Case II and III recoveries, until the last plane for the event has recovered.

We were flying west of Hawaii, and, because an incident occurred during a Case I, zip-lip recovery, we did a modified version of the dance.

Our crew was made up of a carrier-aircraft plane commander (CAPC), a copilot, a mission commander in the air-control officer’s (ACO)



seat, a mission commander as combat-information-center officer (CICO), and a nugget radar operator (RO). We were scheduled for a double-cycle, and the weather conditions were day VFR.

During the flight, the CICO decided to extend the trailing-wire antenna to use the HF-1 radio. After confirming wire speed, the CICO pushed the antenna out (ANT OUT) button. Immediately after pressing the button, a low-torque light illuminated. If a low-torque light comes on, two possible outcomes exist: If the position of the wire is unknown, simultaneously push the ANT OUT and ANT IN button to chop the wire, so it will not be attached to the aircraft upon landing; if the drogue is stuck, proceed with recovery. In either case, notify landing area of a possible missile hazard.

The CICO knew two S-3 Vikings were conducting unit-level training to the west of our current position. The CICO called the S-3s on tactical frequency and had one of them close us to visually inspect the aircraft. The Viking crew was briefed en route on the condition of our aircraft and what to look for. The Viking crew verified the trailing-wire antenna was in and the drogue seated. Because the position of the drogue was confirmed, the wire was not chopped. The Viking crew broke away from us and continued their assigned tasking.

The CAPC talked with the CICO and decided to call marshal and request a straight-in approach, rather than the carrier break. The CAPC explained the situation to marshal and clarified he was not declaring an emergency. Marshal's instructions were to circle overhead mother at 1,000 feet and to expect to be first on the recovery. The CAPC again explained to marshal he was not declaring an emergency, and the straight-in approach was a precautionary measure with an unsafe wire indication. Marshal's instructions remained the same.

In the meantime, an S-3 pilot requested

a straight-in approach because of flight-control problems. Marshal gave the Viking instructions to circle overhead mother at 2,000 feet and to expect to be second on the recovery after us. The CAPC again called marshal to confirm we were to be first in the recovery, and marshal again verified the plan.

Tower then had the S-3 circle 10 miles east of the carrier at 2,000 feet. This call made sense to our E-2C crew, because the overhead stack starts at 2,000 feet, and the launch was complete. The CAPC called tower and asked for instructions, and tower said to continue circling at 1,000 feet. A few minutes later, the CAPC and copilot saw a pair of Tomcats in the carrier break at 800 feet.

The CAPC called tower to confirm we were to recover first. Tower responded, "Hawkeye, you are dead last. Circle 10 miles east of the ship at 1,000 feet."

The current picture had aircraft in the pattern, aircraft in the carrier break, and our E-2C trying to get out of the way.

The CAPC headed east of the carrier to avoid recovering aircraft. We were six miles from the carrier when tower called the Viking, circling at 2,000 feet, and told them to commence their approach. Since we couldn't see the Viking, the CAPC decided to break zip-lip, call the Viking, and let them know we were at 1,000 feet on his approach path and not to descend without a visual. The Viking got a tally at six miles from the ship and started to descend at five miles.

All aircraft safely recovered. However, zip-lip procedures needed to be broken for safety of flight. Marshal and tower obviously were not communicating about the two aircraft needing straight-in approaches. Tower should have called the Hawkeye to get out of the way of aircraft in the carrier break at 800 feet. If the Viking was to recover before us, then we should have been marshaled at a higher altitude. 

Ltjg. Nguyen flies with VAW-113.