



Black line

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FLYING



Ever catch yourself thinking or — even worse — verbalizing, “Gee, this flight’s going really smooth so far” and then in the very next instant discover that the “so far” had just abruptly ended? Pilots are usually well-educated, highly analytical types whom you would not normally expect to believe in luck or jinxes. However, a few are more superstitious than a major leaguer with a five-game hitting streak. Two B-1 sorties stand out in my mind as prime examples of why aircrews should always be ready for the unexpected and the “fog of war” even during routine training missions. Correspondingly, you should never relax your guard despite being “bang on” the black line. Besides, any flight member stupid enough to utter those fateful words out loud had also better be rich enough to buy the beer.

On my first sortie with the brand new squadron commander, mission planning, pre-flight, taxi, takeoff, and

departure had gone without a hitch. I had just mentally noted this when the boss announced that he was clearing off for quick relief. Shamefully, caffeine addiction is an ugly secret in military aviation! He motored his seat full down and back to facilitate getting out of the mummy-like straps, cords, and buckles. The flight went south after he returned and strapped back into the seat. Being vertically challenged, he motored the seat forward and up “SNAP! CRACKLE! POP!” was all we heard before all four of us smelled an aroma similar to burnt gunpowder. Convinced, or perhaps just fearing that the shielded mild-detonating cord had fired and started the seat ejection sequence, the squadron commander rather expeditiously hopped out of the seat, cautiously

pinned it, and safed his switches.

With my visor down, mask and collar up, chin and seat straps cinched tight, I was now flying

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“solo!” The salient point is that there’s no section three or emergency procedure simulator that covers this or any number of other peculiar scenarios. As professional aviators, we should always ask “what if” as a crew and chair-fly as many vagaries as we’re capable of imagining. Evaluating the situation and our options were the first order of business and it was done as a crew. Crew coordination was superb and we had decided upon a course of action in short order and implemented it. The only thing left to do was turn the big behemoth

back to our home airdrome and fly one approach to a full stop. It was my first solo landing in a B-1, and although unusual, solid Crew Resource Management and coordination made it as smooth as possible under the conditions. During postflight checks, it was determined that the seat track had broken, causing the motor to overheat and fail, but we were all prepared for the worst-case scenario of an inadvertent ejection at altitude.

The second incident occurred just after my return from instructor school, when night “bean” requirements were plentiful and mission-ready currencies were a challenge to maintain. Our crew launched around sunset for a “canned” mission of low-level, high-altitude electronic countermeasures training, air-refueling, and transition training in the pattern. Much like my first example, everything went exactly according to plan until shortly after midnight. On 12-mile final for our first approach, the leading edge slats failed to extend. The flaps on a B-1 are interconnected to the slats; therefore, the flaps won’t extend without the slats out first. It was night, our aircraft was heavy, and we were tired. Of course, *it could have been worse, it could have been raining.*

We made a low-approach for visual confirmation of our predicament and entered holding where we chatted with the Supervisor of Flying (SOF) who was now very much awake. We adjusted our gross weight down to just above the lightest we could be and still keep our center of gravity on target with full-forward wing sweep and no flaps and slats. The blended wing design of the B-1 produces enough lift that the Dash-1 warns that without slats and flaps for drag, you have to intentionally fly the plane through ground effect,

down onto to the runway. After that, spoilers, displacement of the horizontal stabilizer, and eight mighty brakes usually took care of all the exponentially exacerbated amount of kinetic energy.

Our main gear touched down just prior to the SOF’s truck, which I used to mark my “go-around-and-try-it-again” threshold on the 12,000 foot-long runway. The spoilers were extending as I purposely lowered the nose to the runway. Normally during landing, the pilot not flying calls out the runway distance remaining markers as the plane progresses down the runway. The cadence is usually a

it was a completely extraneous piece of information; but, at this particular moment, I had genuine appreciation for it. Faced with only a 1,000-foot safety margin of overrun, I quickly decided to try his technique.

I pushed the stick full forward, which deflected the horizontal stabilizer and caused some drag. It is important to caution that doing this routinely will cause undue wear on the nose gear and strut, but so will running off the end of the runway so I had everything to gain. It worked like a champ and we stopped with nearly a 1,000 feet of



steady but relaxed, “9,000 ... 8,000 ... 7,000 ... 6,000.” The pilot then makes a quick tap on the brakes just to check ‘em, rolls out to 3,000 feet remaining, and then uses moderate braking until slowed down to taxi speed. That night, the pilot’s voice was about an octave higher as he spit out the numbers “9-8-7-6” in rapid succession.

At that point my only dilemma was that every time I tried to milk the stick back to displace the stabilizer, the nose flew off the runway and we took weight off the main gear. Gratefully, an “old-head” instructor pilot had shared a kernel of knowledge with me a short time before at the instructor upgrade course. When he told me, I thought

runway remaining. Our next big fear was a brake overtemp or fire. This was mitigated by my expert braking application not to mention a healthy head wind and “lucky” chance precipitation. After the brake temps peaked just below the safety threshold and stabilized, we taxied to the parking area.

The adrenaline surge I got at 2:00 a.m. kept me wired until well after I got home and crawled into bed. Yogi Berra is attributed with the aphorism, “It ain’t over, ‘till it’s over.” You’re entrusted with not just employing but also preserving national assets all the way from engine start through shutdown. Always take this responsibility seriously as you continue to FLY SAFELY! 