

Another Day at the Office

By Cdr. Kelly E. McCoy

It was 24 October and day 54 of an around-the-world deployment for *Nimitz* (CVN 68) and Carrier Air Wing 9. It was also Friday the 13th on station in the North Arabian Gulf in support of Operation Southern Watch. Weather was ideal. Event five was recovering. But midway through, with six birds to land, matters began to unravel.

“Black Knight” 207, a Marine F/A-18C *Hornet*, was abeam the landing signal officer (LSO) platform when the pilot transmitted, “I’m unable to extend the nose gear.” The gear was out but not fully down and locked. He was cleared out of the pattern with his wingman to try to resolve the problem. The aircraft’s fuel state was 3.7 (3,700 pounds remaining).

At 1400 the *Hornet*’s situation deteriorated. The pilot lost 50 percent of his hydraulic system and he was unable to extend the refueling probe. He therefore could not take on additional fuel to proceed to the primary divert field at Aljaber, Kuwait. With fuel quantity now below the “dirty bingo” amount of 4,200 pounds, 207’s fate was sealed: the pilot would have to land into the barricade on board *Nimitz*.

The sequence of events between 1400 and 1426 still makes the hair stand up on the back of my neck. At 1407 we decided to rig the barricade. Four aircraft were now in the air. I directed 207’s wingman to recover ASAP and the other aircraft to extend their flights until the next recovery.

After 207’s wingman landed, we



Illustrations by **Ted Wilbur**

commenced rigging the barricade. It was 1413. With the number three and four wires removed, the crash crane was moved to the rollout area abeam the island. The jet blast deflectors for catapults one and two were raised to provide a protective wall of steel for the dozens of aircraft parked on the bow, in case the *Hornet* disintegrated in the barricade and sent flaming debris down the landing area.

More than 100 flight deck and air wing personnel were gathered along the starboard foul line in response to the calls “Rig the barricade!” and “This is not a drill!” It was 1417. People responsible for the 13 deck plates positioned and locked them. The tractor attached to the barricade began to pull the rig from the top shelf of the barricade storeroom. Two minutes later the rig caught on a hatch, causing the tow rope to break. The rig came to an abrupt halt. Without hesitation, the crew reattached the tow rope to the barricade, unfouled the rig hatch and pulled it across the landing area. This cost two minutes we could not afford.

Meanwhile, in order to reduce drag, 207’s pilot had jettisoned his empty fuel tanks, accelerated to 300 knots and applied high-G forces to get nose gear down and locked. Still

no luck. In retrospect, this was not prudent use of his fuel.

The *Hornet* was 10 miles aft and ready to commence a straight-in approach with fuel state at 1.3. At two miles, the LSO directed 207 to wave off because the rig wasn’t ready. At 1420, as 207 began a 360-degree turn, the aircraft’s fuel state was 1.0. The pilot was seven minutes from flameout.

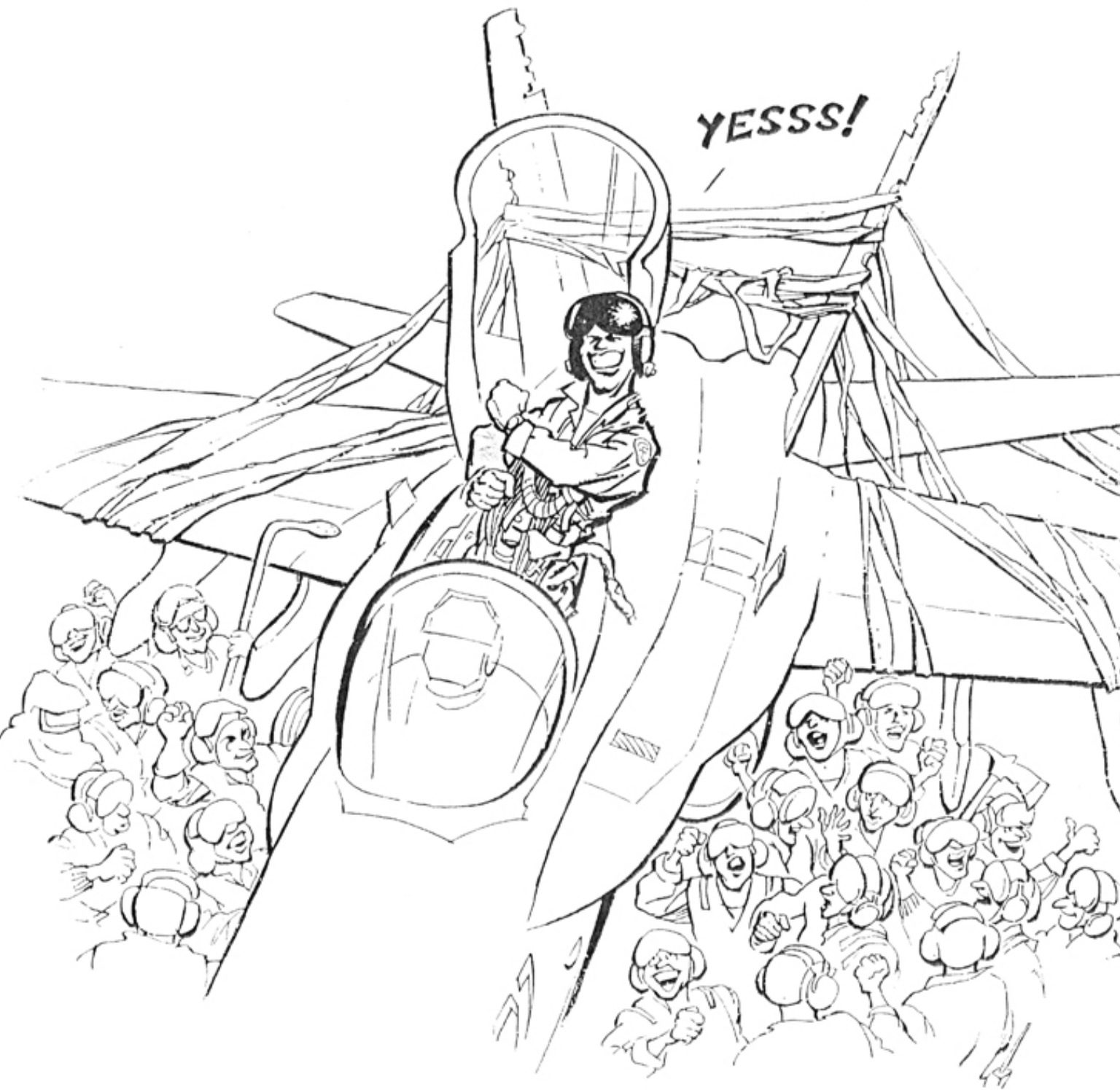
At 1421, with the rig extended, the rig master took charge. As the upper and lower port-side terminals were connected, the barricade riggers physically pulled toward the starboard side of the ship to remove slack from the tensioning straps. Also, the upper and lower tensioning straps were tightened by a pneumatic wrench powered by low-pressure air.

Then Murphy’s Law went into effect.

The air hose on the pneumatic wrench ruptured before the lower load strap was fully tensioned. There was no backup hose available. Luckily, the lower load strap was tight enough to remain in place under the deck plates when the barricade was fully operational.

At 1423 the *Hornet* had to make another 360-degree turn one mile from the ship because the rig still wasn’t ready. You could almost feel the pilot sweating. As he turned, he reported 710 pounds of fuel remaining: four minutes of gas before ejection.

Before 207 completed its final turn, the barricade was raised and ready. At 1424 and 30 seconds, the deck was “green.” All hands were told to clear the landing area. The *Hornet* rolled out approximately one mile from the fantail. At less than half a mile, 207’s starboard engine



sputtered. The pilot waved off in close because he was out of position to safely engage the barricade. Now, the situation became super critical.

At 1425 and 30 seconds, with 300 pounds of fuel and 180 degrees of turn remaining, no one knew if the *Hornet* could make it. The pilot had to either nurse those 300 pounds and fly a perfect approach into the barricade, or eject. We all held our breath and prayed for the best. Happily, Black Knight 207 finished

the turn, rolled wings level and at 40 seconds past 1426, touched down and safely engaged the barricade.

The pilot secured his engines as the flight deck emergency response team took charge. As the engines wound down, the fuel gauge indicated 100 pounds of fuel remaining.

The crew cut the barricade webbing from around the jet, hooked up the crash crane to raise the bird off the deck and removed it from the

landing area. Twenty-five minutes after the landing, the professionals of *Nimitz's* Air Department announced "Ready Deck!" The remainder of the flight schedule went without further incident. But this was not just another day at the office.



**Grampaw Pettibone says:
Bravo Zulu to all hands!**

At the time of this incident, Cdr. McCoy was the proud Air Boss of *Nimitz* (CVN 68).

