

July 2021

Night Traps

So, there you are, enjoying a moonless night, no ambient light other than the amazing stars overhead that expand 360 degrees across the horizon – not a manmade light in sight...

...that is, other than the fourteen other airplanes that are stacked one on top of the other, each a thousand feet apart, and you find the airplane you're piloting in the middle of the pack about fifteen thousand feet above the surface of the ocean...

You're operating in "blue water" conditions, meaning that you have no divert or alternate airfield to land on if, for some reason, you cannot land aboard the aircraft carrier. You compartmentalize everything and the beauty of the stars fades as you begin to descend. At roughly three thousand feet above the ocean, you go through a cloud layer and as you pass through, the stars disappear altogether. You see nothing but black, the darkest black you could ever imagine – until you see one small light about 8 miles away that your instruments tell you is the carrier upon which you're supposed to land. Your mind shifts to flying your airplane, listening to the controllers and frankly, preoccupying your mind with proper procedure so that you have no time to be distracted by fear. As you approach 3 miles out, you begin to point your nose toward the ocean that you cannot see – you're simply in a black hole intentionally plummeting toward the sea. You keep yourself from succumbing to visual illusions – your training has taught you that – and you focus on your instruments, keeping your scan going, and avoiding putting too much attention on any one piece of information. You remain completely focused on the entire situation, what your end goal is, and accomplishing it.

At just inside of one mile to go, you hear the voice of the Landing Signals Officer (LSO) – and your heart rate settles slightly, you now have another set of eyes watching you. The LSO is stationed near the landing area on the carrier deck, there to keep you safe and talk you down if you're in extremis mentally, physically, or mechanically. You block out all other thoughts and sounds except for your training and the voice of the LSO – no noise. In this moment, you have only your hard work that got you to this point and the care and safety of the LSO to see you to the landing deck... which also happens to be moving forward at 30 knots and pitching up and down plus or minus twenty feet.

You successfully land with your legs shaking and a large sense of relief. You're satisfied the last ten minutes of your 6-hour mission is complete. Then you prepare to do it again the next day, night after night until you return home – always that most important personal mission.

As a former naval aviator and LSO, I have two personal takeaways when I think about night traps. First, I know that we have pilots that work on our behalf that are taking night traps every night, regardless of holidays or weekends – never a night off. There were at least three night traps that have occurred across the world just in the time it's taken you to read this far. As we think of our independence this July 4th, I am grateful for such folks, I am grateful for this country and I am eternally grateful for the independence that we all share. It was worth fighting for at the inception of this great country and it's worth continuing to fight for.

Secondly, I am keenly aware that even though I may have been piloting that airplane by myself, I did not successfully land any given night on my own. I had instructors that taught me, controllers guiding me and an LSO to help get me aboard on numerous occasions. I learned the value of compartmentalizing, the value of the scan, the importance of not focusing on just one thing or one aspect but the overall mission, the necessity of the plan, and the responsibility of having the right people alongside me on that journey.

The similarities between my former profession and my current one are not accidental – I could have taken another career path. But that mindset is one of the reasons why we are so motivated to be the people, the team, and the company alongside you on your life's mission. Our company vision is to liberate you from financial concern, and nothing is more motivating to our team than to help you along this path regardless of where you are on that journey... on any given night.

Happy Independence Day!



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