



Photo by TSgt Cedric H. Rudisill

Capt Lance Wilkins, Mountain Home AFB, Idaho

Teamwork saves eagle



Photo by SrA James L. Harper, Jr.

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There I was ... it was a clear night with some scattered clouds at about 20,000 feet. I was returning from a fairly boring Operation NOBLE EAGLE ONE sortie over the Western U.S., and you could see Mountain Home AFB from over 100 miles away. Altogether, it was a beautiful night, and it had been a great way to update my night air-to-air refueling and landing currencies. As I turned to line up on a 7-mile visual approach, approach control handed me off to tower, and it was time to configure. I had already slowed to below 250 knots, so I lowered the landing gear handle and pulled the flap switch aft.

The momentary MASTER CAUTION illuminated but quickly extinguished as the Pitch Ratio drove to the appropriate setting. I looked down to note that the flaps had rolled down and indicated normal. I then heard the landing gear warning tone, and a bright light shone in the handle. I looked at the gear indicator lights, and for the first time in my Air Force career, all gear indicated UNSAFE!

Out of sheer force of habit, I inappropriately called, "Claw 03, base, gear ..." Immediately I realized what I had said and before releasing the mike switch corrected myself saying, "Disregard, I'm showing all gear unsafe."

I had about 6,000 pounds of gas, enough for about four radar patterns and low approaches; so on my first low approach, I asked tower to see if they could spot my gear as I passed by them. Well, in a three bag (three external gas tank) configuration, it's hard to see an Eagle's gear from the ground or in the air. Upon passing the tower at about 300 feet above ground level over the runway, they informed me that "you appear to have a nose

gear, but we can't see your mains."

At this point, all the training I got in the Air Force really began to pay off.

Maintain aircraft control: Maintaining Visual Flight Rules, I started a slightly smaller version of the local radar pattern at the standard altitudes and reminded myself to stick to the altitudes and ground tracks that I knew would keep me safe. As we all know, a constant cross-check of all available instruments is vital, especially at night. I told tower that I would set up for another low approach and that I would be contacting my ops.

Analyze the situation and take the appropriate action: I really wanted to know if my gear were down so I could further determine my best course of action. My Ops Officer was on the horn about the time I got midfield downwind. Upon hearing my predicament, he recalled a previous experience he had of this nature. He elected to run to life support, get a set of Night Vision Goggles (NVGs), and catch a ride out to the runway to see if he could ascertain my gear's actual position. He handed the "checklist reading" over to our Squadron Commander (SQ/CC). As I declared an emergency with tower and set up for the next low approach, he told me he was ready with the checklist.

Passing the tower the second time, they reconfirmed that my nose gear appeared down but that they could see no mains.

With the SQ/CC on the horn, we started running the checklist on ops freq as I heard my Ops Officer and the Vice Wing Commander (CV) standing by on a hand-held radio on tower frequency. The tower personnel were very helpful by allowing the

NVG wearers expeditious access to the taxiway in order to get a better view of my aircraft. As we finished the checklist, I still had no safe gear indications; so I set up for a low approach close to the NVG wearers. My Ops Officer asked me to turn off all exterior lights so he could get a better view.

As I passed over the field on my third low approach of the night, I noted how eerie it is flying around at night with no lights. The CV called me on the radio to tell me that all the gear appeared down, but my main landing gear doors were still open. This was good news — I had wheels! After this, my SQ/CC and I discussed the type of approach and landing I should do, and we decided on an approach-end arrestment.

Land as soon as the situation dictates: Needless to say, after all of this, I was definitely ready to land. As I set up for about a 10-mile final, I now had about 4,000 pounds of gas, four live missiles, a gun with 940 rounds of 20 mm, and a full load of flares.

I lined up on an easy 10-mile final and slowed to on-speed, about 150 knots. I picked up a "one white and three red" visual indication on the Precision Approach Path Indicator lights so I could get down on the runway prior to the normal Instrument Landing System glidepath because the cable was only 964 feet down the runway. As I approached the runway overrun,

I started easing the power back and touched down on speed 300 feet down the runway. I lowered the nose gear and got off the brakes in preparation for the cable engagement.

As the hook caught, I was jerked completely from the seat, and had my shoulder harnesses not been locked, I probably would have smacked my face/mask into the glare shield. The aircraft shuddered to a stop and began a rapid rollback. I countered with power as the nose gear landing strut extended. Fearing that the tails would scrape and I'd "pop a wheelie," I added more power and the nose lowered. The oscillations dampened and the power/brakes combination kept me stopped as the fire crew approached. ▶



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BOTTOM LINE:

Never let your guard down. No sortie is routine no matter how many times you may have done the same thing. This time may be "different."

An uneventful sortie can turn into a crisis anytime — even on short final or when engines are shutting down in the chocks.

Mutual support is more than you and your wingman; it's anyone who can help you.

Sometimes getting the job done requires more than procedures — innovation, like using NVGs from a taxi way to check your gear, can give you much needed information to make a better decision.

I'd like to close by saying I thank all of those who assisted in the safe recovery of this air superiority fighter. In a situation like this, teamwork really does make all the difference!