

Ernesto Howard's Incident Statement

On 12 July 2023, I was flying at Marine Corp Air Station (MCAS) Cherry Point on a work assignment for Draken International. I was operating tail number N143EM on a Public Aircraft Operations (PAO) sortie. This mission was government sanctioned in support of U.S. Marines per a contract Draken has with the Department of Defense. In the previous 24 hours, I had no diet or sleep deficiencies or abnormalities. I slept between 7 and 8 hours. I was in bed for 8 hours and away from work for greater than 12 hours. I had lunch on the way into work with Chris Patton, my flight lead for the day. I was well hydrated and had no external stress factors affecting my mission focus.

The weather on the day of the flight was visual meteorological conditions. Clouds were scattered around 2,000' Above Ground Level (AGL). It was sunny with more than 10 miles of visibility. Temperature was in the high 80's to low 90's Fahrenheit. I had no issues or abnormalities while briefing for the flight, dressing in my flight gear, or stepping to the jet 40 minutes prior to takeoff. This is our normal timeline. There were no major maintenance write-ups with the jet other than the Heads Up Display (HUD) being changed. The newly installed HUD was beautiful and clear.

The walk around and preflight of the jet was normal with nothing effecting my normal habit patterns. All panels were opened to inspect some internal systems of the airplane, including hydraulic pressures, hoses, connections, as well as cables which actuate flight controls. Everything was normal. Start up and ground operations were normal with nothing affecting or changing my normal procedures. All flight control surfaces, flaps, and aircraft configuration, including trim were set appropriately and double checked by three separate maintainers. One maintainer directs the pilot to actuate the trim to full deflection for the rudder, ailerons, and elevator stab. Then the same maintainer sets the trim and ensures all flight controls and trim are set to take off settings in accordance with standard A-4 procedures. Then a final check is performed, before taxi, by a separate, experienced maintenance superintendent to not only double check all systems but ensure the maintainer launching the jet correctly performed and set the configuration required. Finally, the jet is checked over again while pulling out of chocks.

I then taxied the jet to Warm Up Area 1 to accomplish before takeoff and engine checks. There were no abnormalities that delayed my taxi or checks. Once again, I verified that flaps and trim were set appropriately, utilizing the gauges within the cockpit. I also ensured flight controls were free and clear in accordance with the before takeoff checklist. I then looked over my flight lead's jet to ensure his aircraft was properly configured. I remember seeing Chris Patton, who was parked next to me in the warm up area, turn his helmet and look over my airplane, as is our habit pattern to look at each other's jets to ensure everything is set properly prior to take off. I did not rest my hands on top of the stick or have my sleeves catch on any switches within the cockpit.

A rolling takeoff was accomplished from the center pad/underrun of Runway 5L. I placed the stick full forward and tracked the jet down the centerline. The takeoff roll was smooth with no abnormalities noticed. All takeoff gates were met. I did my normal cross check on take off roll, and the jet's engine was making sufficient power and there were no warnings or cautions illuminated. The jet was performing in accordance with the environmental factors, which means slightly worse performance due to the high temperatures. I used a single hand on the stick and a single hand on the throttle. I did

not need to apply the stick left or right to compensate for crosswind. Everything was normal until 145 knots.

At 145 knots, I began to neutralize the stick from its full forward position. I could feel the nose strut extend as the stick reached neutral, as I normally do, but the jet did not rotate and start to fly away with slight back stick pressure. When the nosewheel did not lift, nor the jet rotate, I immediately brought the stick to the fully aft position against the seat while simultaneously running nose trim aft to command the stab to bring the nose up. The last speed I remember seeing was 156 knots which was enough airspeed for the jet to fly. With the stick in the fully aft position, I still had no nose authority and quickly realized that I would be departing the end of the runway which was fast approaching. When the nose still did not rotate, with the jet remaining in a three-point attitude on the ground, I realized there was no longer time to continue attempting takeoff before departing the end of the runway. I made the decision to eject. I stood up the throttle with my left hand while using my left thumb to make a radio call, "2's punching out" while at the exact same time releasing the stick and using my right hand to pull the ejection handle.

I remember the canopy departing with a loud bang and then being hit by the wind rush. The ejection snapped by head down, so I was staring at my feet and could see the fire of the ejection seat's rocket booster. I saw the aircraft initially depart the prepared surface and then the breath was taken from my chest. I do not remember any flailing of my extremities, but I do remember twisting aggressively to the left. I was twisted from looking down at the ground and my feet, to looking up at the sky. I could then feel part of the parachute sequence fire and it snapped me back to looking at the ground and I thought that I was way too low and far too fast to survive. I was then snapped back to looking at the sky and while mostly horizontal struck the ground. I more than likely hit my butt then back then legs and was knocked unconscious. I woke up in the grass to an individual standing over me and was disoriented about where I was and why I was there. I realized that I was severely hurt and was taken care of by the Marine Aircraft Rescue Firefighting team.