

Winging It in the Cold

By Capt. Matthew Polus, USAF

It was a cold day, as it typically is in Alaska during October. Our squadron had sent four EA-6Bs to participate in Cope Thunder, a Pacific Air Force Exercise located at Eielson AFB. I was crewed with the XO and two other junior officers. During the brief, almost the entire crew was concerned about a head cold that was going around the squadron. We were able to clear our ears, so we pushed forward.

As we approached the hold short, I called for takeoff-in-order. Because of recovering aircraft from the previous vulnerability window, we were told there would be a delay. After 15 minutes, tower began clearing aircraft behind us to take off. We repeated our takeoff call to tower. Ultimately, we waited about 40 minutes to get airborne.

By this time, we were battling the weather, mild head colds, and being significantly late to take off. We took the runway, got airborne, and, as we climbed through 10,000 feet, I called for cabin pressure as part of the climb checks. The XO reported, "Holding steady at 8,000 feet."

About two minutes later, we felt a slight relief of pressure in the cockpit. As we leveled off at FL200, the cabin pressure climbed toward 20,000 feet.

We asked center for a lower altitude and RTB because of cabin-pressure failure. Center instructed us to stand by. We now had two options: stand by and wait for center to clear us lower or declare an emergency to expedite the descent out of FL200. Aircraft from the previous vulnerability window still were recovering, and all were low on fuel, because of Eielson's single-runway ops. Declaring an emergency certainly would result in several aircraft diverting to Elmendorf AFB, about 225 miles south. We opted to wait for center to clear us lower and not declare an emergency.

All seemed well as we descended toward the airfield on short final. The XO landed on the long runway, which is 14,507 feet. After we cleared the runway, the XO told the crew we slid quite a bit as the brakes were



applied. Because of the sheer length of the runway, we never were in danger of sliding off the end. However, if we had been landing at Midway Field in Chicago, the results could have been quite different.

During the debrief, we researched the procedures required by NATOPS and our standard-operating procedures (SOP) for cold-weather operations. We quickly realized the Prowler community does not have written standards for operating in cold environments, such as minimum RCR conditions for taxi, takeoff and non-landings. Our safety department has drafted an addendum to the wing SOP, detailing required minimum RCRs for taxi, takeoff and landing.

As aircrew, we should have plans in place for every predictable situation. Operating in cold weather with snow and ice on the airfield, certainly is possible and should be approached with written standards in hand. Don't be afraid to submit changes to SOPs based on your experience; it may be vital for someone in the future. 

Capt. Polus flies with VAQ-133.