

Don't Ever Miss Your Fifth Wedding Anniversary



By LCdr. Michael Tsutagawa

It was Feb. 20, and I was spending my fifth wedding anniversary as a geo-bachelor forward deployed in Japan. My pregnant wife was in Monterey, Calif. Sound familiar?

I was a department head in a squadron that just had completed day and night carrier qualifications (CQs) for 10 of 11 pilots on the first day of flight ops—a rare occurrence.

In a one-week period, I had single-handedly hard-downed four Hawkeyes for various reasons, and I was beginning to be known as the black cloud. But this night was going to be different. I was flying with the ComAEWWingPac pilot of the year, who was in the left seat; I felt comfortable. He was our last remaining pilot to finish CQ for VAW-115—little did we know.

The night started off uneventfully, as we launched into the moonless dark waters off Tokyo. I noticed a quick, white flash off my right side. I checked my windshield quarter panel but saw nothing. The flash must

have been a white strobe from another airplane. About 20 minutes later, another white flash came from the same side. I again used my white light to check on the windshield. I saw nothing wrong; the flash must have been a thundercloud underneath us. A third white flash continued into an arcing fizzle and confirmed the flash definitely was in the copilot's windshield quarter panel.

The pilot instinctively turned off the windshield heat, and I opened the pocket checklist (PCL). We went through the emergency procedures and donned our oxygen masks. The next step of the procedure had us pull the windshield anti-ice circuit breaker (CB). After I slid back my seat and looked for the CB, the mic cord to my oxygen mask disconnected from the ICS adapter—another unwanted distraction. Another check of the quarter panel revealed a five-inch crack. Even though the crack was determined to be on the outside pane (the inside pane is the load-bearing member),

we played it safe and headed back to the ship with our masks still on for an early recovery.

After going through strike and marshal, we eventually wound up at 1,200 feet and eight miles on final. Thinking we were close enough to landing, we dumped down to 200 pounds above max trap and dirtied-up. As we ran through the landing checks, I stared at the landing-gear indicator. The right main-landing gear indicated unsafe, with light in the gear handle, flashing wheels light, and no AOA indexers—great. We now had a gear emergency, along with a cracked windshield; I sucked oxygen from my mask. We cancelled the approach and requested angels two for troubleshooting. “Deferred emergency. No rush,” or so I thought.

I went to the landing-gear-handle-down-with-any-unsafe-indication procedure of the PCL and executed the items while my pilot kept flying the aircraft. The combat-information-center (CIC) crew in the back inspected the right mainmount; it appeared to be down. After checking the hydraulic pressure, the procedure called for resetting the wheel-and-flap-indicator CB. Again, I slid back my seat, leaned back to find the CB, and, for the second time, my mic cord to my oxygen mask disconnected. After I told my pilot of this problem, we decided to put away our oxygen masks because they were causing too many complications.

We used ORM techniques and decided not to put positive and negative Gs on the aircraft while dirty, at night, and during CQ. We also decided not to cycle the landing gear to avoid aggravating the situation. I felt confident blowing down the gear would fix the problem, or so I thought.

The ship’s combat-information-center officer (CICO) maintained situational awareness and crew coordination regarding our fuel state of 3.6. He also calculated the dirty bingo numbers for 135 miles to Atsugi, with 40 knots of wind in the face at 10,000 feet. As I tried to proceed with the emergency blowdown procedures, the CICO said our fuel state was at dirty bingo. I fumbled back to the bingo table and confirmed we were right at our dirty bingo of 3.6. Time was of the essence.

Counting on my past experience with a successful, main-gear blowdown, I made the call first to go through the blowdown procedures before we decided to bingo. This action only would take a few moments, and, if the gear came down, all my problems would go away. My pilot, meanwhile, used good judgment, kept flying the

aircraft, and began a slow climb toward Atsugi, our primary divert. I continued to work the PCL. Though not a memory item, “20, 20, 120” was what I always used to remember this procedure. As we went through the PCL, we put down the gear handle and the emergency-landing-gear handle.

Nothing. Great. Now we really were at dirty bingo, with an unsafe landing gear and a cracked windshield. After reviewing our configuration requirements, I recomputed the numbers for gear down, flaps up (previous numbers assumed gear down, flaps down). We flew a textbook dirty-bingo profile, climbing at 155 knots, minus 1 knot per 1,000 feet. We cruised at 155 knots and caught our breath.

Meanwhile, the CICO coordinated with the boat while I raised Tokyo Center and dialed the transponder to emergency. The time was about 2230 on a Friday night, and we still had a cracked windshield quarter panel. I did not want to climb any higher because of this fact, but I had to stay at 10,000 feet for dirty bingo profile to maximize our gas.

After reaching that altitude, we had time to go over our situation. I declared we were emergency fuel, with an unsafe right main-landing gear, and I requested the short-field gear rigged for the Atsugi north runway. Because of the language barrier, I did not solely rely on this controller; I asked for the tower frequency to be put on the back radio. I raised tower from over 100 miles out (to our surprise) and passed the same info and request. Now that the divert field was informed, we could formulate a game plan.

The next step for unsafe gear was the emergency-landing-gear matrix. It called for dumping excess fuel, making a field arrestment, possibly securing the engine on the same side as the gear failure, and making a single-engine approach. After a thorough crew discussion, we decided to secure the engine on short final and to set up for a single-engine field arrestment. If we had kept the prop running and the gear had collapsed, we would have caused more damage to the prop and fuselage with exploding fiberglass going everywhere.

A lot of radio chatter was on our tac freq. Apparently, a Prowler was single-engine behind us and also was diverting. The boat told us that we had to go to Yokota AFB, 20 miles farther north—great. I had a cracked windshield, unsafe gear, an emergency-fuel profile, a communications barrier, and now the boat is telling us to go to a field farther away—negative.

The back-end crew already were in comms with the emergency Prowler. I told the Prowler pilot of our situation: emergency fuel, and we needed to go to Atsugi for the trap. When I asked for his fuel state, he said he had 13,000 pounds and could make Yokota. Afterward, I learned that single-engine Prowler procedures call for ejection if any secondaries are noticed on the good engine—this drove his decision to go to Atsugi. We also learned that Yokota was closed, and they had to land in the opposite direction on the south runway to get the only rigged arresting gear. Keeping good situational awareness and communications outside the aircraft was critical to minimizing our risks of going where we did not want to go and without the gas to do it.

As we headed inbound, one of my concerns was that the short-field gear would not be rigged because of miscommunication with the Japanese controllers. I was relieved when we were told to contact Yokota Approach, and an English-speaking controller responded. I repeated, for the third time, our request for the short-field gear to be rigged on the Atsugi north runway. I even requested he contact our base beach detachment. Good communication was critical to controlling our risks. Events finally were falling into place.

As we approached the beach, we saw a low, broken layer at about 2,500 feet—not optimum, but we decided to get below the layer and stay VFR. Our let-down-point on our bingo profile was eight miles from the field. Our plan was to descend at flight idle from 10,000 feet at eight miles, get below the layer, and set up for a straight-in for the north runway. We would do a single-engine landing and keep the right gear off the ground as long as possible. If the gear collapsed, we would be ground looping.

My pilot's situational awareness of the field's location was great as we penetrated the low layer. Once below it, we set up for the straight-in and engine shutdown at five miles. Events happened quickly in the final stages of our flight.

We briefed the engine shutdown in depth, covering “power, gear, feather, fire, flaps, max rudder.” I used the condition lever to feather the prop. The right prop feathered as advertised, and my pilot flew a great single-engine landing, keeping the nose high as we caught the field wire. The gear did not collapse—no need to worry about ground looping.

Once in the wire, we put a ground lock on the unsafe landing gear to prevent it from collapsing. We

decided our aircrew, instead of the Japanese fire-rescue crew, would pin the landing gear. While still in the arresting gear, we also had the radar officer pin the right mainmount. Because no tow tractor was available at that hour, and a Prowler possibly was behind us for the trap, I taxied off the active runway to the line, single-engine, with the gear pinned. Later, we found the mainmount was unsafe because of a mechanical problem.

The single biggest CRM point that saved the day was the CICO's query of our fuel state. The communication of the dirty-bingo number resulted in the time-critical decision to bingo shortly after getting the unsafe-gear indication. The max trap weight of 601 just happened to be near our dirty-bingo number that night.

From the cracked windshield, to wearing our O2 masks, to an unsafe gear indication, we had many distractions in the cockpit. Good situational awareness and communication from the back-end crew recaged our heads to the correct mission analysis and the decision to bingo dirty. We rapidly had adapted to deteriorating conditions in the final phases of flight to the boat. Once we were bingo, good communications made sure the arresting gear was set for our arrival. Good situational awareness kept us attuned to the Prowler's emergency; this fact was critical because two emergency aircraft requiring arrested landings were going to the same single-runway airfield. The ship wanted us to divert to Yokota and the Prowler to go to Atsugi. Assertive communication reinforced our need to go to Atsugi, instead of the Prowler, and avoided a conflict.

The decision to make a single-engine approach to an arrested landing was influenced by a junior radar officer. A junior aircrew's assertiveness contributed to our making a better decision. We briefed our plan, maintained situational awareness below the overcast layer, and executed the shutdown and single-engine field arrestment.

Finally, never miss your fifth wedding anniversary, or bad things will happen to you—besides your wife getting mad. Great ORM and CRM saved the day so I can see my next anniversary. This story is another testament to the pilot-of-the-year's skills, but he still didn't finish getting night-qualified.

I called my pregnant wife that night. She was surprised but happy I would call on our anniversary because she thought I was out to sea. I wished her a happy fifth but did not tell her what it took for me to make that special phone call. And I don't think I ever will. 🦅

LCdr. Tsutagawa flies with VAW-115.