

# Tempting

## Mom and Fa

by Lt. Brian Becker

It started off innocently enough: A good-deal cross-country to complete four radio-instrument flights with one of the squadron's more friendly instructors. More importantly, I had a free ticket home to show off the mighty T-2 Buckeye to my family and friends.

The night before the flight, I planned, packed, and called the boys to let them know I was going to be in town. I had not been home for a long time and was excited to see my family and friends. I awoke early the next day and brought the completed flight plan for my instructor to review. He confirmed its accuracy, but changed the aircraft designation and TD code from T-2/P to T-2/R. I did not think a hand-held GPS warranted the change, but my instructor explained that the advantages of going direct outweighed any fine points of the filing process.

He signed the DD-175, and we brought our flight plan to base ops to get the weather brief. The weather along our route and at our first stop was forecast to be VFR. However, our final destination was reporting ceilings of 500 feet, with decreasing visibility down to 1.5 miles with fog and haze. It was still above field minimums but low enough to cause concern.

The first leg went well (considering I spent most of it under the bag). I navigated the route, shot two good approaches from the back seat, and then relinquished the controls to my instructor for the landing. We shut down and proceeded to base ops to put our second leg on request and re-check the weather.

Weather was now calling our destination to be 350 and 1 with fog and haze, below the TACAN minimums of 400 and 1 1/2. It was beginning to look like Mother Nature might put a damper on our plans. We discussed our options and decided to try getting into the field, hopeful the earlier forecast we had received would somehow magically reappear. We were only 120 nm from our destination and had plenty of gas to turn around and head back if we could not make it into the field.

The conditions above 3,000 feet were great. The low layer of clouds was well beneath us as we made our journey across Lake Michigan. Metro was still calling our destination's weather at 300 and 1, below the TACAN minimums. Our destination did, however, have a GPS approach with minimums of 300 and 3/4.

The instructor briefed our plan over the ICS. I would fly off his commands as he read the navigation information from the hand-held GPS. He requested the GPS-Runway-19 approach, and we were on our way.

We started the approach well above the clouds, but by 2,700 feet, we were in the goo. My instructor gave me minor heading changes as we continued down, passing the TACAN minimums of 400 feet without seeing the runway.

"Keep it coming," he said as we passed 350 feet. I leveled off at 300 feet, and he told me to bring it down a little more. We broke out at 275 feet but were offset to the right of the runway by about 3,000 feet with no chance to land.

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“I got it,” he called as he took the controls, switched tower and requested special VFR. We circled over the runway in a left turn, dodging the clouds at 250 to 275 feet and set up for another try. Unfortunately, he overshot on the second attempt, and again we circled the runway in a left turn. I did not think we were ever going to land. It was uncomfortable going in and out of clouds at 250 feet above the ground, but we saw the runway and figured we had come this far and might as well land.

On the third attempt, we landed and rolled out without incident. It was about the 3-board when the excitement ended and a little fear entered my mind. About that same time, I heard, “Don’t ever let me hear of you doing this,” on the ICS.

“Yes sir,” I responded. We parked, got our stories straight, and greeted our families, who were waiting for us. After a great weekend, we met back at the jet and made our way home without any problems.

Upon our return to NAS Meridian, we had a quick debrief. We were both tired and decided to talk about the flight on Monday. Given some time to contemplate our journey, I thought about get-home-itis and how I let my desire to get home, coupled with my junior status in the flight, get me into a dangerous situation. I could have easily spoken up and voiced my concern, but I didn’t. We had a lot to talk about on Monday.

Monday came, and we fully debriefed the flight. We talked about the approaches and basic airwork but mainly focused on our decision to press the weather. We came to the conclusion that if either one of us would have spoken up, things

would have been a lot different. A little voice of common sense was all we would have needed to avert this possible disaster.

It’s been three years since that flight, and I am just now fully grasping the gravity of the situation. Experience has shown me firsthand the effects of pushing marginal weather. When I think back to that June day, I kick myself for not taking charge and allowing someone else’s experience, coupled with my desire to get home, convince me we were doing the right thing. These days, I use the principles of aircrew-coordination training and constantly scrutinize both my decisions and those of my lead. I was lucky once. I don’t want to tempt fate and Mother Nature again.

Lt. Becker flies with VFA-15.

*Hand-held GPS systems, while a great aid to navigation, are not authorized to use as a primary navaid. General Planning 4-2 DD Form 175, Military Flight Plan, Item 3 explains TD codes and aircraft requirements. CNO Message 042032ZAPR00, GPS Policy for Naval Aviation, establishes guidelines for GPS use in the en-route and terminal phases of flight.*

*Unless your aircraft has an integrated system, approved by N-88, with integrity-monitoring (failure protection), you are only authorized to use GPS for practice approaches in VMC. CNO-approved, commercial-receiver integrations are certified for supplemental use only. This includes DoD-approved non-precision approaches to IMC.—Ed. 🦅*