

I Don't Want to Walk Home

By Cdr. Doug Beal

I was stoked. I'd managed to get a good deal cross-country to NAS West Coast on a Friday, with a Saturday return to NAS Fort Worth. My plan? Drop off a part or two in Fallon and continue to the coast, where I had started my naval-aviation career. I'd renew some friendships and stop through Grand Junction on the way home, making it back to Fort Worth just in time to wrap up the first half of the drill weekend. Good deals don't come around every day in naval aviation, and I was happy to get this one.

The trip out was uneventful. On Saturday morning, I filed my return legs with base operations and put a weather brief on request. The forecaster and briefer went through the DD-175-1 with me and covered current observations and forecasts for Walker Field; Grand Junction, Colo.; and NAS JRB Fort Worth. The weather on my arrival at Walker Field was projected to be 6,000 feet overcast ceilings with five miles of visibility. Temperature-dewpoint spread would be about two degrees (first clue). A glimpse of the weather channel that morning made the forecast seem fairly reasonable, although I wasn't paying much attention as I packed. The weather office also pulled up satellite imagery—yep, overcast skies. I filed for FL270 and planned to finish the first 838-mile leg with 3,100 to 3,400 pounds of fuel remaining.

Because the weather was good in Colorado, I didn't consider the alternate weather to be a factor—after all, 3710.7 says that above 3,000/3, I didn't need to file an alternate. I did have Buckley Air National Guard Base in the back of my mind as an alternate though, in case I'd need arresting gear.

The en-route portion went well, and I looked forward to reacquainting with Doug Thompson at

West Star Aviation in Grand Junction. I also planned to peruse his "museum" of aviation memorabilia. I must also mention his line personnel know Hornets and Hornet servicing, and his fuel truck is quick. I'd seemingly picked a good en-route stop. I started my descent out of altitude, and Denver Center switched me to Denver Approach. After the initial check in, they cleared me down to 15,000 feet.

I switched to Walker's ATIS on the back radio and heard, "Walker Field information Echo, time 1855Z. Ceiling and visibility will be reported by the tower. Runways 11 and 29 in use. Advise upon initial contact you have 'Echo.'"

Very helpful. I called the FBO, "West Star, Hunter 91."
"Go ahead, Hunter 91."

"On deck in about 10 minutes for a quick turn."

"Roger, Hunter 91, we'll see you when you get here."

Then some unknown corporate guy checks on with, "West Star, Flex Jet 77. We're going to go ahead and get out of here before the weather really starts to roll in."

What? That can't be good.

If a corporate monkey is worried about weather with his dual-piloted aircraft, equipped with all the Gucci flight management—nav and ILS—then the single-piloted, TACAN-only Hornet may be in trouble. I switched to tower on the aux radio.

"Walker Tower, Hunter 91. What's your current sky condition?"

"Hunter 91. Seven hundred overcast and two miles of visibility."

Crap. Here I am at 15,000 feet with 3.2, in the clag. The weather mins for Grand Junction's TACAN-A circling approach are 1300/3 for Category C and D aircraft—not even close. I'm still 15 miles from Grand Junction. I know nothing about the weather in Denver, except that it probably will be better on the other side of the mountains. I don't even have a Buckley divert waypoint dialed in.

I dialed Buckley's lat-long into the system. The system said that Buckley is just over 200 miles away. The flight-performance-advisory system (FPAS) in my trusty FA-18A+ shows me that I'll be on deck in Denver with 665 pounds, if I continue to fly my present gas guzzling, straight-and-level profile. By the way, the number flashes when it gets that low.

OK, I needed to divert. Fortunately, the winds were out of the west. The bingo fuel in the pocket checklist was 3,270 pounds; I had 3.2 on the gauge. The decision was not hard.

"Denver Approach, Hunter 91. I don't have the weather to make it into Grand Junction today. I need to turn left to a heading of 060 and climb to FL390, present position direct to Buckley Air National Guard Base."

"Hunter 91, Denver Approach. Climb to FL190."

What? That won't work. I needed higher.

"Denver, Hunter 91. Let me rephrase my request, sir. Hunter 91 is declaring an emergency. I'm turning to 060, and I need an immediate climb to FL390."

"Roger, Hunter 91. Fly a heading of 060, climb and maintain FL230. Switch to Denver Center, 322.3"

Flight level 230? Who is he kidding?

I squawked emergency on the transponder and punched in the new frequency.

"Denver, Hunter 91. Emergency aircraft, passing FL200 for FL390. I'm emergency fuel, and I need to continue my climb right now for FL390 to get on my emergency-fuel profile."

"Hunter 91. For traffic, climb and maintain FL270."

I was climbing rapidly when I realized that, at some point, I was going to bust right through one of these altitudes doing 500 knots, transitioning to Mach .86.

"Denver, Hunter 91. Negative. I am an emergency aircraft, and I need to continue my climb to be on profile."

I blew through FL270. At some moment in the climb, the fuel-lo caution and accompanying aural caution annunciated. My right feed tank was at 700 pounds; total fuel was somewhere around 2,000 pounds. As I passed FL300 in the go, Denver Center called me.

"Hunter 91, Denver Center. Say altitude?"

"Denver, Hunter 91. Emergency aircraft, passing FL320 for FL390."

"Hunter 91, Denver. You were assigned FL270. You have traffic, 9 o'clock, five miles, FL340. Level off immediately."

"Negative, Denver. I am an emergency aircraft. I am emergency fuel. I need to continue my climb to FL390 for fuel purposes."

In truth, I broke into the clear at about 32,000 feet and momentarily leveled off at about FL330. I looked everywhere and never saw the traffic, so I continued my climb. I'd been searching in front and above me with the radar during the entire climb but never saw a thing.

My squadron's SOP minimum on-deck fuel in the Hornet is 2,000 pounds. I was looking at 1,400 pounds on the gauge as I leveled off at 39,000 feet. Funny thing is, I had decided not to take the extra 1,000 feet of altitude because of the new domestic-reduced-vertical-separation-minimum (DRVSM) program and its associated westbound traffic.

I had about 50 or so miles to travel before my idle descent. The fuel gauge went up about 100 pounds after my level off. "Mmmm, makin' gas now," I thought. Denver then switched me to a new frequency.

The new controller said, "Hunter 91. You can secure your emergency squawk."

"Thank you, ma'am. I'll need to maintain altitude for now and then start a 250-knot descent at about 73 miles from Buckley."

From then on in, the ATC handling was perfect. I descended for the modified left base to a beautifully clear Buckley ANGB runway 32, and landed with 1,300 pounds. The bingo profile worked as advertised.

Now for the debrief. There were lots of Swiss-cheese holes lining up in this incident. The first one started with the weather folks at NAS West Coast. A quick post-flight weather check at Denver revealed the ceilings in Grand Junction had been below 1,000 feet for at least 12 hours. The current observation and the forecast that were briefed to me when I filed were grossly incorrect. The source of the error was undetermined. I found it interesting that the weather shop at Buckley seemingly had different METARS and TAFs than at NAS West Coast. A quick telephone call to a

very apologetic briefer and his supervisor facilitated some productive learning.

The second phone call I made was to the Denver Center quality-assurance supervisor. He also was very apologetic when I explained my incident and the controllers' reluctance to allow me to climb. Perhaps they underestimated the Hornet's climb performance. He explained that the controllers on duty may have been trying to maintain traffic separation—five miles laterally and 2,000 feet vertically from all other aircraft in the class A—during my bingo profile. Airliners have the traffic-collision-advisory system (TCAS) on board, which will provide them flight guidance away from all other squawking

vided amplifying information and a sanity check to any forecaster's product. Second, I did not look at a surface-weather depiction chart, which might have clued me in that the forecaster's weather was inaccurate. Third, I did not update my destination weather en route. Any one of these actions might have caused me to alter my plan—speed, altitude, destination—and allowed me to avoid the minor seat pucker I experienced during this bingo profile.

When using full-service, military operations on a cross-country, it's easy to get lulled into complacency, but we need to QA the weather products we're given and to update them en route—especially when the temperature-dewpoint spread is two degrees or less.

High-altitude airline traffic will continue to increase as low-cost carriers continue to grow and regional jets continue to proliferate. This increased traffic, coupled with the relatively new DRVSM airspace, will cause the skies above FL290 to become increasingly more crowded. As the armed forces get leaner, air-traffic controllers may be less familiar with military-aircraft-emergency scenarios (like bingo profiles), and air-traffic-control facilities may be less understanding of



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aircraft. He acknowledged that, during a no-kidding bingo profile, DRVSM goes out the window, and the controllers should be moving all other aircraft out of the emergency aircraft's flight path.

I also have to take myself to task. After all, a couple of those Swiss-cheese slices were mine. First, I never double-checked the weather with a separate source, such as the Internet. This added effort could have pro-

vided amplifying information and a sanity check to any forecaster's product. Second, I did not look at a surface-weather depiction chart, which might have clued me in that the forecaster's weather was inaccurate. Third, I did not update my destination weather en route. Any one of these actions might have caused me to alter my plan—speed, altitude, destination—and allowed me to avoid the minor seat pucker I experienced during this bingo profile.

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our priority-handling requirements we must have in an emergency.

Don't be afraid to declare an emergency, and insist upon exercising your emergency authority with clear, concise communication. It may mean the difference between flying into your destination and walking home. 