

Bound for Greenland

by LCdr. Philip Gerard

We were sitting in our dry suits at base operations in Keflavik, Iceland, waiting to see if the forecaster had some good news for us. This was the second day of a four-day return trip from Great Britain to California, and we were looking to get home in time to attend our annual community gala. Just 10 days earlier we had flown our E-2C, housing the latest avionics upgrade, to England, to participate in the world-renowned Farnborough International Air Show. I was trying not to reminisce about the awesome time the five of us just had as I weighed our options for our flight to Greenland. I was hoping for “ceiling and visibility unrestricted,” but that was not the case.

Sondre Stromfjord airfield did not have instrument approaches compatible with our aircraft avionics. We can come aboard a pitching deck at sea in the worst weather, but if an airfield does not have a TACAN or ground-control-approach capabilities, we are limited to visual approaches and must abide by NATOPS weather-alternate criteria. I would have given up all the fancy new equipment in the back of the airplane for a VOR or just a lowly NDB.

The previous day we had left England, refueled in Scotland, jury-rigged the transient-line support equipment to start the plane, and then made an uneventful trip over the North Sea to Iceland. All we thought about was getting some dinner and finding a place to relax before our long trip across the Atlantic Ocean the next day. Over a game of pool, we discussed when we should resume our journey. During our debate, I called weather; the news was not good. A front was moving toward Greenland, bringing in clouds

and high winds. Worst of all, the condition was deteriorating. Well, that ended our discussion. We headed back to the BOQ for some sleep and prepared for an early start.

Our first stop the next day was the weather office. The forecaster produced a “dash one” that indicated marginal VFR conditions at our destination. This weather was nowhere near the sunny California conditions I was accustomed to. Furthermore, the forecaster in Greenland had not yet wakened and the forecast was eight hours old. The Navy forecaster at Keflavik told us he would call Greenland and get an updated forecast as soon as possible. We set off to file and hoped an updated forecast would make our decision easier. Do we press with our trip and beat the weather in Greenland, or wait and possibly spend three more days in Iceland waiting for CAVU conditions?

All eyes were on me, as the aircraft commander, to make the final decision. I needed more information. I developed a plan after several calls to the forecaster and an expensive long distance call to the ATC controllers in Greenland to ascertain their radar-vectoring capabilities. The weather was good enough for a visual approach, but, if it got any worse, we would have to create our own instrument approach. Our plan was simple: get airborne, keep in touch with Keflavik Metro for as long as possible, get weather updates often, and decide whether to continue before marching to the point of no return. If there were any indications the weather was getting worse, we would turn back.

We launched still wearing our uncomfortable dry suits and ready to execute our plan. The first part of the trip was benign. The weather in Iceland was beautiful and continued to stay that way until



we made landfall on the eastern coast of Greenland. We had seen the approaching clouds and continued to get weather updates. There was no change in the current observation or forecast. I was hoping for better news as we approached the turnaround point, but that didn't happen. Legally, we could continue, but the hairs on the back of my neck started to rise. I would have no problem getting in with the current weather, but, if it suddenly turned worse, I would find myself at a field with no alternates and no compatible instrument approach. How hard should we press? Was I getting a case of get-home-itis? We decided to continue, and there was no turning back.

Throughout the rest of the flight, we discussed possible "what if" scenarios. I have never checked the navigation so intensely. We pulled out all the charts, studied the terrain and talked about the visual cues we would see based on our first visit to this barren island just 10 days ago. Should the need arise, I had set up the system for self-contained GPS approach.

As we continued west, the weather at altitude worsened. We were in a solid layer and picking up icing. With all the anti-ice and de-ice equipment on, we still had a slight layer of ice on the leading edges and propeller spinner. Communications with the controllers were intermittent, and I knew we were the only ones flying over Greenland at that time. I started to doubt my decision. Were the current conditions an indication of things to come?

As we approached the end of the flight, we finally were talking to approach control. The current

weather was as forecasted, and we finally broke out of the clouds at 7,000 feet with a scattered layer at 4,000 feet. Approach control vectored us to the initial approach fix, and we descended to the minimum-vectoring altitude. We were tracking our position on the chart, based on the terrain below, but the field was not in sight. Clouds obscured our view. We were in VMC and about to turn to final using our GPS. I knew we could cancel IFR, continue VFR, and position the aircraft to land. As luck would have it, we turned final, and there was a perfect hole between the runway and us. We were safely on deck in minutes, paid the exorbitant transient service fees, took off for Canada, and eventually spent the night at NAS Brunswick, Maine.

Over an enormous lobster dinner, we discussed the day's events and the decisions we made. In our rush to get home as scheduled, we assumed more risk. Though the forecast weather made our flight legal, conditions could have deteriorated, leaving us with two options; land at Sondre Strom or bail out over frozen tundra. This flight taught me the true meaning of "get-home-itis." The easiest thing we could have done was to bed down in Iceland for three days. But being naval aviators, we tend not to settle for the easy way out when there is a mission to accomplish, even if it is just going home. Aircraft commanders are charged with safety of flight. I learned more about this responsibility on this one flight than during my previous 12 years of flying. 🦅

LCdr. Gerard flies with VAW-117.