

Where's the for the Alter

by Capt. Kevin Mulligan

The flight-school instructors always warned us to beware of hops that seem benign. What was to be the most routine hop of the weekend turned out to leave us all quaking in our boots.

Four aircraft were to launch as two sections and fly an administrative leg from MCAS Beaufort to NAS Pensacola. The following day, we were to work in the warning areas off Pensacola doing 2 v 2 intercepts. When we went wheels-in-the-well, we thought we had considered every “what if” scenario.

On Friday afternoon, rain was soaking the entire East Coast, and the non-scheduled pilots headed to the club. The pilots scheduled for local hops were waiting to get cancelled, so they could go to the club. The aircrews on the cross-country hops, however, were trying to find a way to get to more appealing locations. The weather from Texas to Chicago and points east was overcast. A moving weather system made it difficult to accurately forecast the sky conditions for any period of time. After two hours of watching the forecast screen, talking to the weather forecaster, and calling various alternate airfields, the destination weather improved enough to make our launch legal.

Having found a window of opportunity at NAS Pensacola, and having NAS New Orleans as a legal alternate, we launched our two sections. My aircraft was Dash 2 of the second section. My lead was working up for Top Gun and WTI. He and his WSO had both experienced a WestPac cruise. In my backseat was the XO of our squadron. I was the new guy, having been in the squadron for two months. It was my first road show, and

I was looking to get my first taste of air-to-air in the mythical fleet.

Being fat on gas, we expedited our leg down to Pensacola. The lead section, led by a major, was 30 minutes ahead of us. His WSO was a member of our squadron, who had over a year in the fleet and one WestPac under his belt. Dash 2 of that section was a classmate of mine in the FRS. His WSO, a major, was also heading for Top Gun and WTI.

The games began upon their arrival at Pensacola. The lead section found the weather rapidly changing. Dash 2 went missed approach after the GCA controller brought him down too far right of course. As he went missed approach, he

could see the approach lights through the fog passing under his left wingtip. His lead landed safely, and Dash 2 brought it around for another try. In the time it took him to go around the box pattern, the weather had gone to minimums. On his second attempt, again the controller brought him down too far right for a safe approach. Checking his fuel state, he diverted to New Orleans.

After shutdown, the lead's WSO called back to the squadron and advised that, if we hadn't departed yet, we should stay in Beaufort. Since we were on different discrete tactical frequencies, we

Alternate nate?

had not maintained any communication between the two sections. As he spoke to the operations duty officer, the sound of our engines announced our arrival overhead Pensacola. The weather still was being reported at minimums. Lead sent me down first, trying to get me on deck.

The sun was setting in the west, casting orange and red shadows across the top of the cloud deck. The idea of shooting an approach to minimums, at night, wasn't on my top-10 list of things to do. I was determined to make this approach count and land before the sun went down. "Land this beast, go have a few beers, play a couple games of Crud, and hope for better weather tomorrow," I thought.

As I came in on my approach, the GCA controller brought me down too far right. Going missed approach, I never saw the approach lights for the runway. I cleaned up the aircraft and went back into the GCA box pattern. Lead was having a similar experience. As I turned base leg, I heard lead go missed approach and turn downwind. Checking our fuel state, we decided we would give it one more shot and then head for New Orleans. Our weather report said conditions there were 800 and two.

Turning onto final, the final approach controller announced that the weather was now below minimums. I rogered the call but having commenced the approach, we decided to give it a try. Coming down the chute again, the controller again brought me down slightly right of course. Though he was calling me on course at my decision height, I could not see the approach lights.

However, as I went missed approach, I caught a glimpse of the rabbit lights going under my left wing. “There it is,” I said.

“I see it,” said the XO.

However, I had bought my missed approach, and we now were committed to New Orleans.

Lead followed my path over the ground but did not attempt the approach. He had coordinated both aircrafts’ clearances to New Orleans and followed me as we climbed out and headed west. We got as high as we could, as fast as we could, pulled up FPAS (Flight Performance Advisory System), and started working the numbers. The winds aloft were faster than predicted—we had nearly 80 knots in the face.

Hawking the numbers now, both crews were on a bingo profile into New Orleans. FPAS showed us landing with 2,000 pounds of gas.

Since the weather was reported as 800 and two, we were not worried about having to deal with Pensacola’s conditions.

As we headed toward New Orleans, any warm and fuzzy we had disappeared. ATIS had not been updated to report that the weather had dropped below minimums there. We were advised of this condition as center switched us to approach. All other airfields within range were below minimums. It was like an instrument simulator in flight school. I felt as if some “Mr. Zeller¹” was out there on the console, changing the scenario and laughing at me as I sweated it out. The only difference was that I couldn’t put this scenario on freeze.

The XO designated the airport with the radar and put the diamond on the centerline of the approach end of the duty runway. We told New Orleans that we were minimum fuel and needed priority handling to land at NAS New Orleans. Approach responded, “We are below minimums and recommend that you proceed to your alternate.”

“You are our alternate,” we replied. With that, the situation to all involved became crystal clear. As in my simulator experience, there were no other options available. The lines of the box had been drawn, and we were stuck in it.

Rolling out on final, I dirtied up and did my landing checks twice. I hawked the instruments as if I was flying the ultimate check-ride. The on-and-

on calls corresponded with the designation on the end of the runway. At decision height, there was nothing but black soup. However, after a one-second delay, I began to see the dim glow of the rabbit lights, just under my left LEX. My rate of descent was 650 feet per minute, the diamond was three degrees down, my velocity vector was on it, and I was on speed. The lights grew brighter. I saw a line of green, and the runway lights burned through the fog, just as the wheels hit the runway.

Exiting the runway, I breathed for the first time in five minutes, safed the seat, and began to

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taxi to the transient line. As we taxied back toward the approach end of the runway, I saw the landing light of lead’s jet, skimming flatly across the approach-end lights. His wheels touched the deck, and I breathed again.

Dash 2 of the first section was waiting for us at the transient line. We collectively agreed that training did not need to start prior to noon the next day. Bourbon Street had six needy customers. If you’re ever in town, check out our zapper at the House of Blues.

The first lesson learned was that the forecaster could be wrong and still keep his job. If the weather does not develop as forecasted, the forecasters can scratch their heads and reach for another cup of coffee. However, as the aircrew, you can find yourself cornered into a very small box. Second, do not be lulled into a false sense of security, simply because you are Dash 2 in a “benign” administrative hop. Who looks after you better than you? Nobody. Third, back up the GCA controller with your air-to-ground radar. Much like backing up CV-approach needles with bulls-eye, the TACAN, and the BRC course line, the diamond can help you get the jet on deck safely. Fourth, if mother nature is throwing a fit, it might be better to keep the jets at home. Finally, no matter what time of year you visit Bourbon Street, it is always a good time. 

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