

Bad Case of the Blues

By Lt. Kyle Horlacher

Cross-countries are as good a deal as you can get in the Navy. A cross-country to an island paradise is even better—all naval aviators will attest to this fact. Each trip offers great flying and fun times with good friends.

Our operations officer had stood up at an AOM and said, “I have a great deal, a trip to Bermuda.” He gave us the details for the trip, and it sounded great. But, after the dust had settled, only two people had put their names in the hat.

With his offer getting little enthusiasm, I should have figured this cross-country was not going to be your standard one. If it sounds too good to be true, it usually is.

Our mission was to fly to Oceana, meet up with Blue Angel No. 7, and then drag him over the pond to Bermuda. For Viking aviators, tanking Hornets is as second nature as brushing your teeth, so this trip should have been easy money. The good deal for us was a day and night in Bermuda.

The trip to Bermuda and back was uneventful. The only hiccup was when we arrived four hours late in Bermuda because of a passport SNAFU. Because we had to depart at sunrise the next morning, this delay curtailed some potentially enjoyable liberty.

We manned up at 6 a.m. the next morning and departed Bermuda as the sun rose over the island—always a breathtaking sight. The trip back to the states was quick and painless. After dropping off the Blues at Andrews Air Force Base, we grabbed lunch and launched for the return leg to Jacksonville.

We encountered mild IMC conditions at FL220. The horizontal visibility was poor, but the vertical visibility

was good, and we could see the ground. About 220 miles from home plate, with my COTAC at the controls, we heard a loud bang. I imagine the sound was similar to what you would hear if you were shot out of a cannon. Having just switched radio frequencies, I was looking down when we heard the noise. When I looked up, the pilot’s front windshield had spider-cracked, and I was left with about 10 percent forward visibility.

As a crew of four, we immediately went through our boldfaced procedures for windshield-canopy crack. The COTAC already had started to slow the jet when I took back the controls. We asked center for an emergency descent, which they immediately granted. We went VMC as we started to descend. With visors down, oxygen masks on, and cabin pressure dumped, we slowed to 200 knots and descended to 6,000 feet.

I briefed the crew that if the windshield imploded, not to pull anything until we were sure the airplane couldn’t fly, and I was certain the Hoov was airworthy without the windshield. We hugged the coast while we discussed our options. We unanimously decided to declare an emergency because we did not know how long the windshield would hold, and I sure didn’t want to fly back to Jax with 100-plus knots of breeze in my face. We asked center for direct routing to the nearest airfield, Charleston AFB. The controller cleared us direct to Charleston.

Now that we knew where we were going, other details needed to be resolved. Do we want to take a trap? Where should we dirty-up? What type of approach do we want?

To answer our first question, we asked Charleston if the gear was ready, and they came back, “Give us about 30 minutes.” Did our situation warrant a trap or not? Our original plan was to flare the landing and roll into the gear. We know a field arrestment is not as severe as a CV arrestment, but thoughts ran through our heads of trapping and then sending bits and pieces of my windshield down the runway or, even worse, down the engine. A shattered windshield is one thing, but FODing an engine is another. We opted not to wait for the gear but to flare the landing and minimize the impact forces on the airframe upon touchdown.

After dumping gas, we answered our second question and dirtied up over the water about 20 miles from



Photo modified.

Charleston. We didn't want to ruin someone's day at the beach by raining down pieces of Viking canopy or, worse yet, a Viking. Fortunately, the dirty-up was uneventful.

We then decided what type of approach we wanted. The answer to our third question was a straight-in because we could control what we did or did not fly over. Keep in mind, we still had no idea if the windshield was going to hold. We maneuvered the aircraft around Charleston, avoiding populated areas as best we could, and eventually set up for a two-mile straight-in. My COTAC earned his flight pay during this part of the flight.

With the sun hitting the cracked windshield, my visibility was more degraded. My COTAC gave me lineup, VSI, and altitude calls all the way down. Once I knew we had the runway, I was able to fly, looking out my left side canopy. If I saw too much grass on my side, I would not be lined up to land.

The approach looked good, and, with the backup of my rightseater, we flared the landing. We heaved a couple sighs of relief when the windshield held during our rollout. The runway was 9,000 feet long, so I was

easy on the brakes. When the plane was at a normal taxi speed, I shut down the No. 1 engine—just in case. After the landing, I was confident all the pieces of the windshield would stay on the jet, but it seemed prudent not to take chances. Our original plan was to get towed off the runway, but Charleston didn't think they had a tow bar that would fit an S-3B. We taxied off the runway and shut down.

A call to our skipper and the maintenance master chief resulted in a rescue team driving to Charleston with a new windshield. It was replaced the next day, and we flew back to Jax early that evening.

The maintenance team inspected the damaged windshield and discovered the outer two layers had shattered. Fortunately, the Viking has a five-layer windshield. As it turned out, our biggest risk would have been FODing the No. 1 engine, instead of a total separation of the windshield. Our windshield-temperature control (heat-control unit) had failed, which eventually led to the windshield malfunction. 🦅

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