

# INTERNAL LOSS OF COMMUNICATIONS

By LCdr. Rex Kenyon

What an awesome deal—this has to be the best job in the world! As an old East Coast LAMPS bubba, who had been transplanted to beautiful San Diego, this was the deal of the century.

I was on a six-month, counter-narcotics deployment, and, for our midcruise, ship's maintenance availability, we were going to spend a month at Naval Station Mayport. This trip would let me see some old friends and familiar places, do some heavy grooming on our mighty steed, and get some shore-based flying around my old stomping grounds.

I was a seasoned fleet aviator with more than 2,000 hours in model and enjoying the life of an officer in charge. I headed a detachment of 23 of the Navy's finest, with \$38 million of taxpayer hardware in my charge. We were sweeping the seas of the scourge of drugs, and we were livin' the dream. I thought, "Man, and they pay me to do this?"

Being shore-based gave us the opportunity to get in some training we had missed during the past three months at sea. We'd do pattern work, shoot approaches, and schedule instrument flying; sounds like an out-and-in in the making.

We checked NOTAMS and weather, filed a flight plan, kicked the tires, and were off to beautiful Athens, Ga. Not a cloud was in the sky; this weather rivaled San Diego's. It was perfect. All went well on the way there, and then we had lunch and saddled up to do it in reverse. We filed a VFR-IFR composite flight plan to give my young H2P some experience in dealing with

flight-service stations and picking up IFR on the go. He took care of business like it was an RI-18 check; we got clearance to Mayport and were headed home.

Everything went smoothly until we got back into my comfort zone. We checked in with Jacksonville approach control and were given, "Come right 10 degrees."

On radar vectors, right? Well, not really. Eventually, we were cleared for the approach, except the clearance



we received wasn't quite clear, Clarence. "Can I get a vector, Victor?"

We were "cleared for the Copter TACAN 052 to NS Mayport, cross PAWNE at 3,000, report established on the approach." Sounds simple, but here's where it got complicated.

From here on, I will put what actually was said in quotes, and *what only was thought* in parentheses.

H2P: (So, I have to go to the TACAN, then outbound to the initial-approach fix, PAWNE.)

Me: (So, we are cleared direct to the IAF, PAWNE.)

H2P: “OK, I am cleared to descend once I am outbound on the 180 radial.” (Outbound from the TACAN).

Me: “No, you have to wait until you cross PAWNE.” (Direct to the IAF)

H2P: “We are on a feeder route.” (Outbound from the TACAN)

Me: “No, we’re not.” (We are going to PAWNE.)

And so on until we reached PAWNE. Now, FYI, PAWNE is at five miles on the 180 radial. Heading south, you do a procedure turn to head north, inbound to the IAF, and then intercept the 4.5-mile arc. A few minutes later, we crossed PAWNE outbound, and the young H2P started a turn to the right. And the saga continued...

Me: (Hmm, he must be doing a procedure turn to get established inbound to PAWNE.)

H2P: (OK, I overshot PAWNE, I am at five miles, but I can just put a cut in to the right to pick up the 4.5-mile arc.)

Me: (Hmm, he really isn’t coming back to the 180 radial inbound; I have flown this a hundred times, and I know you have to fly over the Lighthouse Grill. Yep, there’s the Ritz waaaay over there. Something’s wrong.)

H2P: (OK, getting back to the arc, all is well.)

Me: “Hey, where are you going? You are supposed to be over there.”

H2P: “I am intercepting the arc.”

Me: “You aren’t on the arc, you still have to cross PAWNE.” (Inbound)

H2P: “I already did cross PAWNE.” (Outbound)

Me: “No, you didn’t cross PAWNE (Inbound), PAWNE is over there. You have to cross PAWNE (Inbound) before you intercept the arc.”

H2P: “I already did cross PAWNE (Outbound) and now I have a cut in to intercept the arc.”

Me: “You aren’t on the arc, the arc is 4.5 and you are at 5.3.”

H2P: “You have the controls.” (Jerk)

Me: “I have the controls.” (Dummy)

This magic moment was followed by a very, very quiet final approach and landing for shutdown. After we were safe on deck, we discussed what had happened and discovered just how **differently we each saw the same situation**.

We each understood a different clearance. I expected vectors and clearance to the initial-approach fix, while he was expecting to go direct to the TACAN

station, then outbound to the IAF. Once at the IAF, I expected him to do a procedure turn, and he planned to turn directly onto the arc. When he was telling me he already had crossed PAWNE, he was correct, but he just didn’t realize, and I failed to make it clear that you had to cross PAWNE *inbound* to intercept the arc.

With the perfect weather and my high comfort level (read complacency) flying that approach, I never recognized that my copilot might be confused about it.

We did not thoroughly brief the approach before commencing it. If we truly had briefed the approach, our confusion would have been exposed.

The actual clearance we received was not complete or accurate, but we never stopped to ask for clarification. We each **assumed** what the controller wanted us to do, and assumed differently.

As the aircraft commander, I was slow to take command of my aircraft. I should have taken the controls when confusion was first evident, before we were way off course. We then should have briefed the crew when we were safe and sound.

In the end, it sure put a damper on an otherwise perfect day. After an extensive debrief, we both learned some valuable lessons and realized where our breakdowns in communication occurred. But, what if this day hadn’t been CAVU? What if it hadn’t been an approach I had flown 600 times before, on a slow Friday, in relatively slow airspace? If this had been a foreign country, or in a busy class-bravo airspace, or with weather near minimums, a very different story would have been written—by an AMB, instead of the AC. Clear, concise communications between all crew members is vital, even on perfect days.

Always thoroughly brief an approach before commencing, verbalizing all vectors, headings, and altitudes. Make sure there is no confusion about your understanding or intentions. As the HAC, you have to quickly recognize when you have lost effective communication among the crew and actively work to correct the problem.

And the most important lesson of all: Communication is the most critical component of good crew coordination. We have to take these lessons to heart and constantly hone our skills to keep us on top. After all, who wouldn’t want to do this for a living? 

LCdr. Kenyon flies with HSL-43.