



Bad Call on Airspeed

By Capt. G. T. Bignell, USMC

We were fat, dumb and happy while we planned our trip home from a glorious weekend cross-country in Tokyo. The weather was bad enough to make four helicopter pilots file IFR. We double-checked fuel for both aircraft and figured we had enough for the return trip to Iwakuni, Japan. Everything was in place for an uneventful trip home.

Both crews completed their preflight inspections and began their start checklists. We filed separate flight plans, but, to keep call signs simple, the first aircraft was referred to as Dash 1 and the second as Dash 2. Dash 1 called for taxi and departed. Ten minutes

later, Dash 2 did the same. Because of sequencing, the aircraft ended up about 20 minutes apart. As Dash 2, we maintained contact with Dash 1 to obtain winds, weather and fuel status. This strategy proved useful because, one-and-a-half hours into the flight, the weather looked good enough to cancel IFR. We contacted Dash 1 to get their thoughts about the weather and its location. Dash 1 said it was not a good idea to cancel IFR. Our fuel states remained roughly the same for the first two hours of flight. Because of our fuel situation and confidence in our planning, the last thing we were concerned about was fuel. Everything still looked “peachy.”

Wow, flying IFR sure is boring. How do those great big, “cool” jets do this so much? The boredom almost was overwhelming. Oh, as I reflect, how I preferred the boredom to the excitement about to ensue. With one hour and fifteen minutes left in the flight, we were “lucky” to have an auxiliary tank decide to cease transferring. That tank had over 600 pounds of fuel we could not get to. In light of this development, we decided to use that little wheel thingy that was issued back in flight school. We dusted off the old whiz wheel and began spinning away. After trying to spin the wheel, we decided it would be better if we just put the wheel away and manually did the calculations. “Man, that thing sure is hard to use,” I thought. I don’t remember it being that hard.

Well, there we were again, but not so fat, dumb and happy anymore. Our situation wouldn’t really have been a problem had we seen the ground. However, we hadn’t seen the ground in the last hour. I had an idea: Change our airspeed to maximum range (that doesn’t happen often). Everyone agreed this idea was a grand one. “Does anyone know what that speed is?” I queried. No luck; we didn’t have a clue. But wait, I remembered some charts in the back of the pocket checklist. I was relatively sure the answer was in one of those charts somewhere. We found the chart, but we forgot how to read the crazy thing.

After being baffled thoroughly by the most complicated chart on earth, we decided on 80 knots. That number was the only one that stuck in our head. It turns out 80 knots was the maximum endurance, and we had made a bad call on airspeed. The lesson is to know how to read those silly charts—all of them.

We had about 45 minutes of usable fuel and 40 minutes of flight time. But, there was a catch: Flight time was off the GPS. If we were flying direct to Iwakuni, it would take 40 minutes. The controllers were vectoring us, and our route wasn’t close to being direct. We let ATC know our fuel state and told them we couldn’t accept a delay. ATC instructed us to maintain heading, which was no help. It took 10 minutes for them to translate what we were saying, and for us to translate what they were saying (English to Japanese can be trying).

We were at decision time: to declare or not to declare. For some reason, a helicopter pilot’s worst

nightmare is to declare an emergency. We decided to declare. ATC turned us to a more direct route. Still flying around at a painfully slow 80 knots, we checked the GPS to discover we still had 30 minutes flying time left. Cross-checking that info with fuel available, we had exactly the same amount of fuel as flight time—this situation was not good.

Dash 1 continued to communicate with us. They, of course, had no problem with their fuel, and, therefore, they were far less stressed. It’s a good thing they were ahead of us to relay when they barely had broken out at decision height. “Cool, throw another ball in the mix to juggle,” I thought.

Around this time, we decided 80 knots wasn’t going to get us there, and we kicked it up a bunch of notches. ATC held us at 3,000 feet. We knew we were over water, so we requested a descent to VMC conditions. ATC denied our request several times. We received a friendly reminder from the caution panel that we might want to land soon: The No. 1, fuel-low caution light illuminated. ATIS called weather to be just above mins—basically what Dash 1 had told us.

We finally were told to stand by for the final controller. We could see the light at the end of the tunnel, and the load started to lift, slightly. Then the second low-fuel light illuminated, and, once again, we were reminded to land. The approach was IFR the entire way down. At decision height, there was a pause, then, finally, after what seemed like forever, we saw the field. We dumped the nose and went as fast as we could to get feet dry over the runway. Finally, its wheels were on the deck.

Texaco, the crew, and I always will have a special bond that never can be broken.

Crew-resource management is not limited to your cockpit. Other aircraft, the ODO and anyone near the ODO, and ATC are all available resources. Know how to use all fuel and planning charts that pertain to your aircraft. Even when you fly IFR, have an idea of what is below you. Remain as calm as possible in the cockpit; it will help put everyone at ease, and they’ll be more useful crew members. 

Capt. Bignell flies with HMH-363.