This Is No Place to Be

By Lt. Ryan Christopherson

The title of this story ran through my mind while our flight of nine Tomcats were low on gas, in marginal weather, and looking for a place to land. The hair on the back of my neck stood up with good reason. Several links in the chain led to this near-mishap.

Aircraft photo by Capt. Dana Potts, background photo by Matthew J. Thomas. Composite.

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I was a senior lieutenant, with 1,600 hours of flight time, and a veteran of 15 East-to-West-Coast detachments; most of the dets were planned by me. I also had been in the squadron for two and a half years. The weather was supposed to be good, and no problems seemed to be in sight. I was the det OinC and preoccupied with helping solve the usual last-minute changes to our personnel and cargo airlifts.

The cross-country planning task had been given to me two days before the flight, and it was mostly complete. I flew as Dash 4 in a nine-plane, three-leg flight from Oceana to Whidbey Island. The first stop was planned for Whiteman AFB. The weather at 0600 for Whiteman was low fog at 100 feet, with quarter-mile visibility. However, it was forecasted to be 100 sct, 200 bkn at our arrival time, six hours later. There was no need to file a divert by OPNAV rules, and the satellite picture showed no clouds within 300 miles of Whiteman, but we filed Scott AFB as the divert anyway. I have seen low fog burn off in the early morning hundreds of times.

The brief went smoothly and included a thorough weather review. The plan was to get weather updates at takeoff and en route. The weather at Whiteman had improved to 200 feet and one-half mile at our takeoff, but we still had nearly three hours before arrival, and the fog was expected to lift very soon.

The takeoff and rendezvous went well and made for a great start to our 3,000-mile cross-country. My RIO and I checked the Whiteman weather about an hour into the flight, and it was 300 feet and three-quarters mile, improving slowly. I started to get a little worried, but we still had two hours left en route, which gave us time and options.

Events then started to conspire against us. We were flying on a Saturday, which means that

some of the Air Force bases were closed. The Tomcat has a terrific precision-approach system designed to work with the aircraft carrier but not with the civilian ILS. In other words, if the airport does not have a PAR, as most in the United States don't, we have no precision-approach capabilities. Our system is not approved for GPS approaches. We, as military pilots, are not required to carry low plates, SIDS or STARS. We flew as a flight of nine, and very few, if any, approach controls can handle an influx of nine aircraft quickly and efficiently, because the planes are forced to split up as singles and shoot individual TACAN approaches.

The Tomcat burns about 6,000 pounds of gas an hour. If you have to orbit for a half-hour waiting for your buddies to land, after flying 1,000 miles, this burn rate makes it difficult to have enough gas for an approach, and then have enough gas to divert if you don't break out. Did I mention there were nine of us? A five-minute delay each, adds up to 45 minutes for dash last.

At only an hour from Whiteman, the field still was 100 feet below mins. Even with the recent shearing I got at the base-exchange barber shop, the hair on the back of my neck stood up. A quick check of the weather for the fields around Whiteman showed they also were below mins.

Now, it started to get tricky. We have, at best, an hour's worth of fuel left and no place to go. The flight lead made a good and quick decision to divert into Scott AFB. Didn't I mention we are not required to carry low plates anymore? Yes, in fact, the Scott AFB approach was in the lows. A quick check of the nine-plane flight confirmed nobody had the plates. The flight lead did a good job of contacting tower, telling them we were diverting to his field, and needed the final portion of the TACAN read to him. The tower understood and got the necessary information to our flight.

The flight lead shot the approach and reported two widely spaced runways; we were shooting the approach to the left one. They had broken out about 200 feet above mins. I sighed with relief, but, by this time, I had been orbiting for nearly 35 minutes and was starting to get nervous about gas.

I finally was cleared to commence the approach as my RIO and I discussed the information he read from the IFR Sup. The approach was uneventful, and we even broke out about 250 feet above mins, but, again, without seeing the airport diagram in the plates, the sight picture just didn't look right.

Although the TACAN needle was pegged on the correct radial, we broke out extremely far left. I started to wonder if we had shot the approach to the correct field. Instead of seeing two runways, we saw only one, and it didn't look like our approach was designed for the runway we were cleared to land on. We were at 700 feet and one and a half miles, with the visibility obscured by light fog. The sight picture didn't look right, and the hair on the back of my neck was standing up. As we got closer, we still didn't see the second runway; however, we now were breaking out Tomcats on the runway, as well as on the taxiway.

Time compression set in, and my RIO and I seemed to make the logical conclusion at the same time—the taxiway actually was the left runway, which we were cleared to land on. We were about one mile and 500 feet when I made the call on squadron tac freq for the planes to exit the runway. I realized we were lined up on the taxiway, as I got a call to wave off. I just had broken a golden rule of aviation: Never make a mistake that you can't blame on your RIO or more junior wingman. We waved off, shot another approach, and landed uneventfully—last.

The lessons are many. First, when things start to go wrong, the hair on the back of your neck is telling you something, so listen. Second, the weather always will screw you; be prepared for it by thorough preflight preparation. Just one copy of the approach plate in one the nine planes would have made a huge difference. Third, don't disregard the capabilities of your aircraft. The Tomcat was designed to fly high, fast, and destroy multiple enemy aircraft. We tied our hands by flying as a large formation on the weekend.

Further hampering us is the inability for the Tomcat to shoot precision-civilian-ILS approaches—this deficiency will increase as more fields become ILS capable. Navy bases seem to be the only PAR-capable fields; however, they seem to be water-soluble, and there are precious few of them in the middle of the country. Last, no 3,000-mile flight is ordinary, no matter how many times you have done it.

As Navy jet pilots, we are very comfortable around our home-field operating area or carrier. Cross-country flying is nearly a warfare-mission area, all onto its own, and should be treated as such. When we leave our comfort zone for places that might have the equipment we are accustomed to, things quickly can go wrong. A solid preflight will allow you to make decisions based on all available options, instead of being forced into a less than optimal situation.

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