

Lost in the Haze

By LCdr. Nate Yarusso

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Many late summer flights in the northern Arabian Gulf are flown in hazy conditions, especially just before sunset. We were scheduled for a quick hop to the amphibious-readiness group (ARG) flagship for a parts swap. Our two helos had performed well all cruise, but we needed a part. Because the Gator carried CH-46s, we were confident they'd have what we needed.

Our ship, USNS *Supply* (T-AOE-6), was conducting an EMCON drill and would have its TACAN off during our entire flight. However, if we had an emergency, we'd call the ship, and the TACAN would be turned on. Flight quarters would be manned while we were gone. The ship's radios would be on, but the running lights and the tower beacon would be secured. The ship

would maintain a set course and speed, so all we had to do was plot its track, using basic dead-reckoning (DR) principles—no problem. The visibility looked good, the ARG was close by, and the flight should be less than an hour. We'd be back well before sunset. We felt comfortable flying without any particular reference to where our ship would be.

We briefed the flight and discussed our game plan. With our trade-in parts on board, we launched on time and headed west. Shortly, we made contact and checked in with our position, souls-on-board, and fuel state. We were given the obligatory instructions to hold in starboard delta until they were ready to recover us. Once established, we realized we had arrived right in the middle of a recovery cycle. This situation was

odd because most ships schedule the logistics window not to interfere with recoveries. Fortunately, the recovery course was the same as our ship's course and only 20 minutes away.

An hour later, we were cleared to land—so much for the quick hop. We talked about where our home might be, quickly did some math, and had a good idea of where we needed to go. As the grapes plugged the hose to our helo, I noticed the ship turning to port, out and away from our ship's base-recovery course (BRC).

"OK, let's keep track of how long we're on this course," I said to the crew.

I started to feel nervous about our exact position. An hour-and-a-half had passed since we took off; anything could have happened during that time. Our second crewman came back with the parts as the hose was being unplugged.

"This is good," I thought, until the first crewman pointed out we had the wrong part. "Rats, another delay," I amended.

I coordinated with the boss to remain a little longer on deck to get the parts swapped out. He wasn't happy about the delay because the next cycle was manning up. But, they cleared us to stay on deck as our crewman sprinted from the helo back into the ship.

I looked to the east. The purple color of dusk was setting in, and the horizon completely was obscured in haze. We had no idea what the lateral visibility was, but it wasn't good. The boss put pressure on us to get off his deck. He made it clear to us that we were launching in 10 minutes—with or without our crewman.

The sun was getting low. We were sans one crewman, no parts, and no solid idea of where we were. The ship turned back into the wind, and we were ordered to take off. As the brownshirts were removing our chains, our crewman burst from the island and jumped into the helo. We were off the deck and on our way back but unsure which way to go.

How we assessed which direction to go is just this side of pure guesswork. We knew to head east but didn't know how far north or south to go to correct. We figured mother had to be north of our position.

"How long did the amphib travel to the west?" I asked.

Silence. No one had kept track of the time.

"It's got to be to the northeast. Let's head that way," I said, not pleased with myself.

I suddenly got the image of a Peanuts movie I had seen as a kid. It was the part where a puzzled Charlie Brown stood in front of a raft pointing ahead while his crew paddled and chanted, "Lead, Charlie Brown, lead!"

All we saw outside was a milkbowl, with no sign of the ship. We were burning fuel, and it was getting darker. Everyone was silent and scanning the horizon for any sign of a ship. After 30 minutes of heading east, I cried uncle and contacted the ship. They said they had heard a helo in the area. We immediately started a left-hand orbit and looked around—no joy. I asked to have the TACAN turned on.

"Stand by," came the familiar response. No doubt our request would roll up and down the chain of command for a while.

"Turn on the tower beacon," I requested.

Lo and behold, off to the left, out of the haze, a beautiful, rotating green light appeared—no hull, no landing area, just a light. I radioed tower and said we had them in sight and were coming in to land. We were only a couple of miles away, so we quickly closed the distance and landed before the TACAN ever came on.

I've had a long time to mull over what we did wrong on this flight. First, we never should have been so cavalier with an EMCON flight. I should have asked the ship for a solid game plan, with its best-known approximate position. I should have had my copilot concentrate solely on DR navigation; it may or may not have helped because of the haze, but at least we would have been sure of our position. We also neglected to ask the Gator for a vector home. The pressure I got from the tower kept me from speaking up. Pressure or no, I needed that info.

I'll chalk it up to blind luck that we found our way back—close enough so we could see the ship's beacon. Any number of factors could have transpired, preventing us from finding home. The list of "what ifs" is lengthy and scary. 

LCdr. Yarusso flew with HC-8 at the time of this story. He now flies with VAQ-130.

I cringe whenever I get a story and the happy ending is credited to "blind luck." —Ed.