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weather was replaced by talk of going home and jokes about stopping to ride the perfect, rolling waves, like the Army air cav did in “Apocalypse Now.” We had gambled and hit the jackpot. But then we touched the money too soon.

With a GPS to back us up, we were able to make instant fuel calculations. A 40-knot headwind meant we had just enough gas to make our destination, but it was going to be tight. Should we stop in Astoria with two hours of gas remaining or press on? Encouraged by the flawless weather, we pressed on.

Cruising along at 500 feet, about 10 miles off the coast, we found that our good weather was not going to last even an hour. Right after our go-no-go point to return to Astoria, we encountered a few wisps of clouds. Before we knew it, our route forward and our path of retreat were blocked by fog. In a matter of 10 minutes, we had gone from CAVU to less than a mile in fog.

This was not good. We pulled out the charts. A small field with a TACAN station was 20 miles away in Newport, but it had no approach. Our destination had an approach, but we would not have fuel for a divert or a second approach if the weather there also was deteriorating. We had no comms with anyone. Could it get worse?

You bet. Our wingman called “lost sight” and reported that his radar altimeter, which had been intermittent, had decided to fail entirely. They were flying off of the barometric altimeter, but I could hear that they were not comfortable. None of us were.

A harried call to Newport UNICOM yielded a friendly voice of a Coast Guard pilot who was flying along the coast in his H-65. Relieved to be in contact with someone, we got his weather report: visibility 1.5 miles and ceiling 500 feet. To two H-46 crews, flying at 150 feet to maintain visual reference with the water, his weather report was a description of Shangri-La. Our separated flight of two made

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a beeline for Newport’s TACAN station, reporting radial and DME positions to each other so we could maintain horizontal separation.

As promised by our Coast Guard compatriot, we started to make out the coastal landmarks just before going feet dry. Using our charts, we were able to orient ourselves and pick up on the airfield. We touched down, followed shortly by our wingman.

There’s a scene in “Planes, Trains, and Automobiles” when John Candy suggests to Steve Martin that they could “laugh about it now” as the two of them watch their rental car burning on the freeway. After we landed, a member of our crew said the same thing, but



Photo by Sgt. Brook R. Kelsey
Photo modification by Yvonne Dawson

no one was laughing. We were shaking our heads, wondering how we had gotten ourselves into this situation.

For the previous four days, we had been the perfect example of anti-group-think. We unanimously had decided to play it safe. Everybody had been willing to play devil's advocate to the point where we thought we never were going to go anywhere. We'd spent four days making the safe choice: avoiding bad weather on day one, not accepting a so-so mechanical problem on day two, getting sufficient rest and completing a thorough FCF on day three, and diverting earlier on day four.

After four days, we were all a little frustrated and at the first sign of good news, we pushed our way out to the coast into a dangerous situation. We were on the coast of Oregon an hour before sunset in December with just enough fuel and no communications with ATC. If the weather over land had not been as "good" as it was, a lot more could have gone wrong, and our CO would not have been getting a safe-on-deck call from no-man's land, Oregon. Instead, that friendly Coast Guard pilot may have been telling him the unhappy details of his rescue attempt that failed. 🦅

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