

DECISIONS, DECISIONS,



by *LCdr. Paul Jennings*

It wasn't a big deal, but when it was over, I was amazed at how many decisions my crew and I faced while handling a malfunction on an Operations Southern Watch (OSW) flight. This article gives you a chance to decide if we were idiots or heroes.

The squadron was two weeks into our 90-day deployment, flying out of lovely Prince Sultan Airbase (PSAB), Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, with the Air Force's 363d Air Expeditionary Wing. The turnover had gone well with the outgoing Prowler squadron, and we were quickly settling into the OSW routine. My crew and I were on our fourth flight into "the box," Iraq's southern no-fly zone. With about 15 minutes left to cover in the vul window and in the vicinity of Tallil Airfield, I noticed the left combined hydraulic pump almost at zero psi.

Decision number one was easy: Turn south now. As we proceeded to the Saudi-Iraqi border, we contacted the AWACS, told them about our problem, and asked for the weather at the primary divert field, Al Jaber in Kuwait. AWACS reported the weather at Al Jaber as two miles in blowing dust. During our two short weeks in the desert, we'd all gained a healthy respect for how quickly a 120-degree, bright and sunny day could go to one-quarter mile visibility on the deck due to blowing dust, a sort of chocolate-milk-bowl effect.

Decision number two was more complex: Where do we land? Al Jaber was only about 60 miles away, and we had 6,000 pounds of gas. Easy to make that, but what about the weather? PSAB was calling sky clear with visibility unlimited, but it

was 45 minutes away, and a fight with the KC-135 stood between us and PSAB. We were at the border, entering the tanker tracks, and had completed the checklist steps for loss of a single hydraulic pump. We'd found no real guidance other than "land as soon as practicable."

Just as we finished the checklist, the stability augmentation system failed. The jet lurched to the left. I trimmed the rudder to center the ball, tried re-engaging the stab aug and got the same results as it immediately clicked off. Plugging the KC-135 without stab aug didn't appeal to me, so Al Jaber was looking more and more likely. As Ops O and ASO, I'd always told aircrew to leave external issues out of the cockpit when flying, but I couldn't help thinking of the logistical nightmare of having a jet (or two, since our wingman was dutifully following along) stuck in Kuwait, missing future OSW sorties as a result.

I waited for the other combined pump to fail, as is the norm for the Prowler, which would make the divert decision easy, but no such luck. I spotted our tanker about 7 miles away and was faced with a third decision: Should I try tanking without stab aug? I decided to try, and if the tanking went OK, decision number two would be easier, and we'd head to PSAB.

As I lined up behind the basket, I considered letting my wingman tank first, so if I ended up wearing the basket, at least he'd have his gas and could get to PSAB. One look at my fuel quantity (5,000 pounds) made me decide not to back off. If that other pump failed, I'd be looking at a fairly

lengthy checklist to get the jet dirty via the backup methods and would need the extra gas. Also, the thought of having to make multiple approaches at Al Jaber because of poor visibility came to mind.

After a few stabs at the basket, we were in. We took 7,000 pounds, pulled out, let the wingman fuel up and proceeded south toward PSAB. The lone combined-system pump was hanging in there like a champ, and the flight system was going strong as well. A visual check by our wingman didn't reveal anything leaking, smoking or otherwise unusual about the exterior of our jet, so we all breathed a little more easily. About that time, the mission commander piped up from the back seat that we should call the Supervisor of Flying (SOF) and advise him of our situation. We Navy guys aren't used to using the SOF, but he's a great asset—kind of like a CATCC rep for the whole base.

We contacted the SOF and told him to expect a short-field arrestment. He immediately got the wheels in motion and set up holding and tanking for the rest of the OSW package so we could get in first. The prescribed corridor leading from Iraq to PSAB was taking us east of the field to avoid Dhahran's airspace. I figured I didn't need any undue delay, so we elected to play the 7700 card to get priority handling direct to PSAB. It worked.

As we approached the field, ATC descended us and set us up for a PAR. Once level at 5,000 feet, with our wingman observing, we dirtied up. The lone combined pump strained under the load of the gear and flaps coming down, but sprang back

up to 3,000 psi once everything was down and dirty. We detached the wingman for his own approach and completed our landing checklist.

Even though things were looking good, do we take the trap as a precaution? With all of OSW waiting to land behind us, I decided to leave the hook up and told the SOF. I'd seen pumps fail on touchdown before, so we watched closely as we landed to see how things went with our ailing hydraulics. If the pump quit, I'd lose normal brakes and have to go to the aux system. Fortunately, things went in our favor. We full-stopped, taxied clear of the runway, met the armada of USAF emergency vehicles and had our gear pinned before taxiing back to the line.

In retrospect, the most conservative route would have been to head for Al Jaber and take a trap. We did neither. All's well that ends well, right? Sort of. While what we did was perfectly legal, and our crew had fully discussed it and agreed, nobody would have faulted us for ending up in the gear in Kuwait. Of course, had we ended up wearing a souvenir KC-135 basket on our probe or, worse yet, ejecting 100 miles from PSAB because of some catastrophic hydraulic failure, we'd have been the recipients of a barrage of second-guessing.

We're paid to make decisions based on our training and experience every time we man up an aircraft. We made ours. What would you have done in similar circumstances? 🦅

LCdr. Jennings flies with VAQ-134.

On the Cat

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