



A Routine and Simple Flight

By Lt. Ryan Yost

We had settled into a comfortable routine in the third area of operations of the deployment, and our E-2C was airborne for a simple night-currency flight. Having the words “routine” and “simple” in the same sentence probably is a clue of where this story is going.

The aircraft commander flew from the right seat, while I talked on the radio with my head down. I heard the engine noise increase and immediately looked up to see the AC advancing the port power lever to max power. Something was up. Neither the mission commander in the back, nor I, knew what had happened because we

had been talking on the radio and hadn't heard the AC's first two intercom announcements.

As I released the mic switch, I heard the AC announce, "Good rpm," as he pointed at the gauge. A quick scan of the eyebrow panel confirmed the AC was responding to a light for the main-propeller pump on the port engine.

A propeller-pump light indicates either a loss of pitch-change fluid or a failed pump inside the pitch-control unit. Either situation may lead to the complete loss of pitch control and can lock the propeller at a fixed pitch. This gripe creates directional-control difficulties and, under certain conditions, can lead to the complete loss of directional control.

I quickly ended my radio conversation and pressed the master-test switch for the lights to make sure the standby-pump light for the port propeller wasn't burnt out. The port engine's rpm still was within limits. We secured the port engine and feathered its propeller before we lost all the pitch-change fluid from the pitch-control unit on the port propeller.

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Next, we checked to make sure the propeller fully had feathered. We talked to the mission commander and declared an emergency to the ship. We had started our descent from FL230 when the aircraft commander told me to set the air-conditioning switch to override. This is a step on the post-shutdown checklist, which we had not begun, and this action did prompt me to call for the rest of the post-shutdown procedures.

The crew worked together to get our ducks in a row as we headed back to the ship. I flew the aircraft, while the AC determined the bingo fuel required for our primary divert field. We discussed single-engine flight characteristics and approach techniques and reviewed our options. The mission commander and AC explained our dilemma and plan with the squadron rep on Mom.

We switched up marshal, and the controller sent us to the top of the stack. Obviously, not everyone had gotten word of our situation.

We told the controller of our problem and politely stated our request to come down first. Minutes later, we again were marshalled on a different radial at Angels six, just above the overcast layer. We had a single-engine approach through an 800-foot-overcast layer to a pitching deck, but we were as prepared as we could be.

After we had made a few laps in marshal, the controller told us to proceed inbound and to commence the approach. We started a slow descent to 1,200 feet and made a large play for the final bearing, which was 60 degrees away. I searched for glide slope and centerline the entire way. We finally broke out at 600 feet and a mile behind the ship—high and fast. With the ship in sight and a ball on the lens, I made a big correction to get on glide slope and centerline. I fought lineup all the way. Paddles called for a little power in the middle, and the ball dropped as I made a last-minute lineup correction at the ramp. We were elated at the tug of the arresting cable. We also heard a loud bang and felt the aircraft shudder when our nosewheel ran over "Fast Eddie," as we drifted well left on the rollout. My lineup and power corrections obviously hadn't been enough, but we were safe on deck.

During our debrief, the AC mentioned he had experienced early symptoms of hypoxia less than a minute after we had secured the engine, air conditioner and cabin pressure. He recognized his physiological condition and immediately had me set the air-conditioning switch to override. He recognized his symptoms because of his low-pressure chamber training.

We missed the master-caution light and its associated cabin-altitude light because numerous other caution lights were lit at the same time. We did diagnose the original problem and shut down the engine.

A routine and simple flight doesn't exist. We did not expect a propeller-pump light to illuminate. None of us had thought through the issues of securing an engine at FL230. In the middle of the emergency, we did not fully analyze all the caution lights, assuming instead all were associated with the secured engine—they were, but not exactly as we had thought. 

Lt. Yost flies with VAW-124.