Blue-Water-Divert Operations:

TACAIR's Classic Oxymoron

By LCdr. Stephen Gaze

How many times have you heard the CVIC briefer say, "Mother is working blue-water operations; your primary divert is NAF Western Pacific, bearing 350 degrees for 300 nautical miles."

When conducting true blue-water operations, divert fields are unreachable, even when you have your own tankers. However, in the transition zone from blue to brown water, the perception of blue-water operations leads many aircrew to forgo thorough consideration of the divert option.

We were three months into an extended WestPac deployment. The ship was transiting north to a port call in Yokosuka, Japan, after operating near Guam for several weeks. As we manned up our mighty Prowler for the first launch of the day, the weather was beautiful, and mother was working Case I operations. It was a great day to be an ECMO in the front seat. Our fuel ladder was planned for a standard Case I recovery, 4,000 pounds of gas 30 minutes after the next planned launch.

Fortunately, the 1+15 cycle time prevented us from converting all our dead dinosaurs into heat, noise and thrust, and we failed to reach our fuel ladder. As I checked in through strike and marshal, we heard the dreaded call, "Mother's working Case III, weather is 1,000 feet, broken."

Suddenly, we were working a much more stringent fuel ladder—2,500 pounds higher. As we proceeded to the marshal stack, I saw the sky absolutely was clear 20 miles east of the carrier. But, to get the most training out of our OPTAR dollar, the ship had chosen to operate under a solid frontal layer that had moved in.

As we pushed from 6,000 feet, things started to get more interesting as paddles called,

"99 Shogun, landing lights on."

Descending through 2,000 feet, we were enveloped in clouds. After the ACLS lock-on at five miles, we proceeded to three miles and started our descent.

"503, three-quarter mile, call the ball."

"503, clara."

"Drop lock."

"Wave off, wave off."

The fun factor started to go away, especially considering we had gotten down to 200 feet and one-half mile but still hadn't seen the ship. Time for round two. Our fuel now was down to 6,000 pounds.

"503, three-quarter mile, call the ball."

"503, clara."

"Paddles contact."

"Come left," after we started large left-to-right drift

"Wave off, wave off."

As we waved off, we caught sight of the deck and flew right over the tower. Several witnesses placed us at 50 feet above the tower. A strong right crosswind, which went away at 200 feet, had turned our crab into a large left-to-right drift in the middle, preventing a safe landing.

The carrier was working blue-water operations. NAF Atsugi was 300 miles to the north, and Iwo Jima was 350 miles to the south. Twelve approaches by air-wing aircraft resulted in eight waveoffs and only four successful arrestments. The weather at NAF Atsugi had gone down to 100 overcast and one-half-mile visibility. Iwo Jima, here we come.

The EA-6B PCL has bingo charts only out to 300 nautical miles. A quick extrapolation by the backseaters came up with a requirement of 6,800 pounds for the bingo profile, assuming the standard 50-knot headwind. Simultaneously, squadron representatives in CATCC had come to the same solution. We were directed to rendezvous with an S-3 tanker and take 3,000 pounds of gas. After refueling, our fuel state was a semicomfortable 7,500 pounds. The pilot flew the bingo profile to 35,000 feet on our way to Iwo Jima.

As we flew south, our crew-coordination skills came into play. ECMO 3 backed me up on the charts and helped monitor time, distance and fuel remaining. ECMO 2 was into the publications and used the third radio to establish communication with the Japanese controllers on the island. I got traffic advisories from our controllers on the carrier and also talked with our fellow air-wing buddies heading south.

As we flew farther south and our fuel totalizer counted down, we anxiously awaited the TACAN lock-on. The weather started to break up, and we planned for a visual arrival into Iwo Jima. The Prowler bingo profile includes arrival overhead the destination at 10,000 feet MSL, with 2,000 pounds of gas. We had started with 700 pounds over the bingo requirement, and headed down a little earlier because of the good weather.

We rolled out on extended centerline and were greeted by 8,000 feet of concrete pointing at the approaches to Mt. Surabachi. We shut down with 3,000 pounds of fuel remaining—coincidentally, the same amount we had taken from the tanker.

In all, seven aircraft bingoed to Iwo Jima from that recovery: our Prowler, three Hornets and three Viking tankers. After a night on the beach with the Japanese Self Defense Forces providing lodging and meals, we launched the next day for a long 550-mile flight to the carrier. Our flight ended in a successful Case III approach and landing, with a high ceiling at 1,000 feet.

What did we learn? Always be prepared to divert. Bring approach plates, even if you don't think you'll need them during blue-water operations. Despite NAF Atsugi being the primary divert, we didn't have their approach plates. Fortunately, our secondary divert, Iwo Jima, was in the same volume we had been using around Guam, and I still had a copy in my nav bag. One of the CATCC reps had to brief the Iwo Jima approach over the radio to a Hornet pilot as he diverted.

The bingo profile works; we flew it as advertised. We burned most of our gas in the climb, but, once we reached 35,000 feet, we had the fuel to make it all the way.

Our crew coordination extended to the squadron reps in CATCC and the other diverting aircrew. Senior leadership on the ship were involved closely.

The term blue-water operations implies the carrier will keep launching tankers until everyone traps successfully or barricades. On our recovery, the weather was so bad that paddles could not have gotten everyone safely into the wires or barricades before aircraft had started to flame out. In these situations, when a viable long-range divert is available, it makes sense to divert.

The issue of blue-water versus divert operations has many considerations: number of aircraft airborne, amount of fuel available in the tankers, GSE support at the divert, compatible instrument approaches, diplomatic clearances, and political ramifications. Know the options, and be prepared.

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