

How'd We Do Dat

by Cdr. Frank Coyle

That was close. Too close. How did I land below NATOPS minimum fuel limits, and on a training flight flying with the NATOPS officer? Let's go back a few months...

I was having a great department-head tour with HC-5. Three detachments, seven countries, four oceans, numerous liberty ports, and hundreds of flight hours later, I finally returned to Guam. After some leave, I relieved the Ops O. Yes, this department-head gig was a wonderful thing, and there was more. The prospective XO was going to be late in arriving, and with the change of command, we'd be without an XO for about six weeks! Who was the senior department head? Acting XO? The good deals just kept on coming.

I was in my last month of my tour. I had orders, and was already thinking about leaving this tropical paradise and returning stateside. Skeds came in the office one day and asked, "Sir, wanna fly a night doppler requal?"

"Roger that, sign me up."

The flight went fine. Pick a location, drop a smoke, do the pre-approach checklist, and shoot enough night,

coupled-hover approaches to qualify myself, the NATOPS officer, and the aircrewmembers for another 30 days. Piece of cake.

We finished slightly ahead of schedule, and, it being a beautiful night, decided to shoot an instrument approach into homeplate for proficiency. We figured there was enough gas for one approach. Hey, we were senior, fleet-experienced aviators, under positive control, and the conditions were CAVU. Besides, I'd flown this approach dozens of times.

The IAF for the TACAN RWY 6 approach into Andersen AFB is 12 DME over the water. Since we were close in to the field after the doppler approaches, we needed to transit out-bound. Standard approach airspeed for a helo is 90 KIAS. On this approach, it's common to bump airspeed to 120 to save time. We received the standard ATC instructions, and began flying to the IAF. En route, one of us thought it would be a good idea to radio the Coast Guard and let them know we left a smoke burning offshore. I was flying, and the NATOPS officer was calling the Coasties.

The Coast Guard didn't answer, so I decided it would be a good idea to help with the radios. Now, both our heads were inside the cockpit. Enter poor crew coordination.

The HH-46D has two ARC-182 UHF/VHF radios. Typically, one radio will have squadron common selected, and the other will have the active frequency for the flight. They aren't complicated, but every so often, someone figures out a way to get the faulty transmission award. In our zeal to report the smoke to the Coast Guard, we switched off the ATC frequency. Don't ask how we did it, but we did, and neither of us noticed that mistake.

Usually, the Guam controllers call the turn inbound for this approach. We didn't think it too odd that the IAF came and went without a call from ATC, so outbound we continued to fly. Maybe the controllers had something else occupying them. They'd get to us in due time. We chatted about the beautiful weather, my next duty station, how good the NATOPS job is, and anything and everything but the task at hand.

After several minutes, I noted how quiet the radio calls had become, especially since we could see the commercial traffic arriving and departing Guam International. I'm not sure when, but at some point, we both looked at the gauges and realized we were well beyond the IAF and had burned more gas than we wanted.

Our first reaction was, "How'd we do dat?" Our second was an immediate turn inbound, followed by a radio call to ATC. It was during the radio call we realized we had been off frequency for several minutes. After getting back up with ATC and confessing our sins, we focused our attention on fuel remaining. I knew it would be close. We'd make the field, but not without pushing the NATOPS limits. For the H-46, thou shall not land with less than 200 pounds per side. Another issue was airspeed. Max range or max endurance? Flying at 145 (VnE) would get us there faster, but would burn more gas. Flying at 70 KIAS (single-engine airspeed) would save a lot of gas, but would take longer. We decided to maintain 120 KIAS (max range)—in retrospect, a smart decision.

We could see Andersen in the distance. It is terribly frustrating to see an airfield and be powerless to get there more quickly, especially when running low on gas. We discussed a PEL short of the field, but discarded that option. I knew the engines would continue to run with less than 200 pounds per side, as long as we maintained a level attitude. Good fortune was with us as we went feet dry and landed uneventfully at the field. The fuel gauges indicated between 180 and 190 pounds per side as we cleared the active runway.

After shutting down, we debriefed, shook our heads and told ourselves we had learned a valuable lesson. In retrospect, I could have stopped the chain of events sooner; by saying no to that last approach, avoiding the chit-chat during the out-bound leg, or questioning the radio silence sooner. Too much assuming and too little questioning contributed to our predicament. 🦅

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