

BACKED IN

By Lt. Keith Dienstl

The *Kitty Hawk* and CVW-5 team were nearing the end of their 2000 spring cruise. The crew could see light at the end of the tunnel as the Hawk rounded the southern tip of the Kwa peninsula and steamed north. The work was not yet done, though. All the countries bordering the South China Sea soon would be sending fighter aircraft to look at one of America's premier air wings in action while we steamed northeast.

The first crew would brief around 0300, and

Photo-composite by Matthew J. Thomas

A CORNER

the last crew would recover at 2200 to 2300. This pace would wear down anybody, and the Liberty Bells were no exception.

Finally, we had just one more morning sortie before a Hong Kong port call and some much needed R&R. Who would volunteer for that last morning hop? There weren't any night flights the previous evening, so a couple crews were eligible. As a young enterprising CAPC and always yearning for more experience and flight time, I jumped at the opportunity. One of our up-and-coming, enthusiastic 2Ps eagerly joined me to provide a complete front-end crew. Insightful conversation about our next outdoor adventure wouldn't allow any drowsiness to creep into our cockpit. The rest of the seats soon were filled, and the next thing we heard was that dreaded alarm clock at 0230. Heck, I felt like I just had started to doze off when that incessant buzz awakened me.

We headed to the wardroom for a quick breakfast. At the crew brief, I stressed the need to resist a lax feeling, but it appeared to fall onto the deaf ears of a lethargic crew. We geared up, read the ADB and sauntered toward the flight deck. As I took that first step onto the wet flight deck and into the blackness, a heavy mist blanketed me, while a stunning realization struck. This was not the hop to volunteer for.

I pressed on across the foggy, dimly-lit flight deck toward my awaiting Hawkeye. The preflight and start went without incident and we soon were ready for launch. As we taxied aft, the sky lightened and revealed a foreboding grayness. I reached forward and switched on the stormscope, while searching for holes in the dense cloud cover. Our stormscope isn't much, and is far from weather radar; it provides only information on areas of electrical discharge and is seldom used. However, this morning it was especially colorful. The only area somewhat devoid of electrical activity was aft of the ship, where we weren't going! Oh well, we taxied up, went into tension, and were shot off into the unknown. We were knocked about like a bucket of bolts as we passed through heavy turbulence. We rode our bucking bronco right into a solid overcast at 1,000 feet. We broke out at 20,000 feet and found a small, clear area north of the ship to work our racetrack.

We hadn't been airborne for two hours when our little clear area began to close in. A small break in the clouds presented itself, so off we went. Our little Hummer found a much larger patch of sky to the southeast of the ship. It wasn't long before the backenders told us radar coverage wasn't optimal from that location. We needed to head toward the northwest—right

where we didn't want to go, from a front-end perspective.

We flew on and soon entered the turbulence, which was followed by steady rain. The engine anti-ice came on and, with it, our fuel consumption increased. This normally wouldn't concern us, but we were scheduled for a 4.0, which usually meant at least a 4.5 by the time we would recover. On this mission, fuel conservation was one of our main priorities. As time wore on, the weather showed no signs of improvement, but recovery time neared. We asked approach control for a manual push from altitude, trying to conserve what little gas we could. Just as the much-anticipated commencement of our recovery was to begin, contacts of interest suddenly blipped onto the radar screen, and we were delayed momentarily. Word came that our needed relief was having some minor holdups back aboard the *Kitty Hawk*, and the bigwigs below were stressing the importance of continuous radar coverage. As expected, we were asked to stay on station. We figured on another 15 to 20 minutes were all we could spare.

The admiral's staff demanded an E-2 remain airborne. Our fellow Liberty Bells had not launched yet. The backenders relayed the urgent request to stay airborne forward. Here we were—a new CAPC and a junior 2P—in the overcast, with freezing temperatures, steady rain, low on gas and searching to find medium ground that wouldn't have me standing tall in front of CAG explaining a hasty recovery. I felt backed into a corner. Wait a minute, though: I signed for this aircraft, and I have five lives in my hands. Their safety was the most important thing, especially when the operation didn't warrant unnecessary risk. That was it, the decision was made. We were going home!

We calculated the consumption rate for our remaining fuel and picked a drop-dead time. We would give the flag staff all the time we could spare. We soon hit the mark and called approach control with a "Ready to come aboard." We then completed approach checks and started down. Our aircraft was the last to recover, and we were late, but we had an excuse. As we continued inbound, conditions deteriorated, temperatures warmed, and

the downpour intensified. The Hawkeye's ill-designed windshield-wiper system would have to be used. We turned on the virtually useless wipers, and, with that, our visibility was reduced significantly. I strained to see anything through the streakish blur the wipers left on my windshield, dreading the moment I would need to transition to an outside scan.

We figured we had one chance to get aboard, maybe two. There was no available divert; the ship was our only option. We still were in the clouds as we leveled at 1,200 feet. My copilot worked feverishly to provide constant backup on headings, altitudes and airspeeds, as I concentrated on my flight instruments.

"Fly up and right," he relayed as the needles popped into view on our attitude indicators. After some vigorous adjustments, the needles were on and on, and I started a gentle rate of descent. Visibility was severely limited, but we knew the cloud bottoms couldn't be far below. The approach went as smoothly as could be expected. A sense of confidence and ease began to overcome us as momentary glances of choppy water began to appear. Suddenly, my azimuth needle began racing toward the right, the rain intensified, and an instant later, we broke out of the cloud cover at 400 feet.

The wiper speed was cranked up, but our visibility only worsened. I struggled to stay with the needles as it became obvious the ship was in a hard-right-hand turn. Fortunately, my copilot caught a quick glimpse of the ship and followed with a, "Come hard right." I did so for about 30 to 40 degrees. Upon leveling, the needles immediately settled down. I was able to fly them in to three-quarters of a mile, with an occasional blurred glimpse of the ship. We called, "Clara ball. Clara lineup." The LSO's calm voice began the talk down. I saw a yellow blur that made up the meatball and blindly followed the calls for lineup.

In another instant, we were jerked forward against our straining shoulder harnesses as our hook found a wire. We both looked over and sighed heavily in relief as the flight for which we had originally volunteered wound up being much more than we had bargained for. 🦅

Lt. Dienstl flies with VAW-115.