The Uneventful Trip

Photo by Matthew J. Thomas. Modified.

By LCdr. Robert Pereboom

While our squadron was deployed to Diego Garcia, one of our many missions was the primary medical-evacuation platform for personnel at that remote location. We already had conducted 13 medevacs in the first three months of deployment, so the odds of getting launched were good, however random the occurrences might be.

A call came in late one evening requesting a ready-alert launch to Singapore with a patient suffering from abdominal pains. We loaded the patient and departed for another zero-dark-30, six-hour flight to Singapore.

After being airborne for three hours, most of the crew and medical staff were sleeping or relaxing. We had flown through some decent weather, but that was about to change. The weather forecast had shown a large area of isolated thunderstorms we would have to pick through. Unfortunately, in the P-3, we do not have the luxury of flying over T-cells. Instead, we must choose the path of least resistance and use our surface-search radar as the primary means of weather avoidance.

The weather brief was accurate, and we picked our way around the weather, continually going in and out of the clouds. To be safe, I had everyone take a seat and buckle up, and the medical staff secured the patient and his gear.

The intensity of the weather increased. While in the clouds, we saw a spectacular Saint Elmo's fire display on the front windscreen. Caused by static electricity, this display creates lights on the windshield in a spider-web design. Many of the passengers came up front to watch, but I sent them back to strap in because the weather continued to deteriorate.

For about 20 minutes, we successfully had stayed out of heavy turbulence. Suddenly, we hit a pocket of windshear turbulence that lifted the entire aircraft and suspended everything in space. This condition lasted long enough for us to realize we were to sustain a rough jolt—then it hit! Everything not fastened down securely flew into the air.

Shortly after the aft crew reported everyone and everything were OK in the back, we saw a fuel-boost-pump light come on in the flight station. We executed the NATOPS procedures for this malfunction, and the flight engineer went to the aft CB panel to check if the circuit breaker had tripped. While he was there, a huge flash of lightning burst near the aircraft. This flash gave us our second malfunction of the night, a GEN OFF light. We now had lost one of our three generators.

I called for the FE to return to the flight station and received the worst news from our radar operator, "Sir, I just lost the radar." A bus transfer associated with the loss of the generator had caused the radar to fail. After a few expletives, we unsuccessfully tried the reset procedures for the generator. The radar operator worked to get the radar back on-line.

It was night, we were in the clouds, and the radar was down; we had no way of steering our way around the heaviest cells. I remembered the last call from the radar operator. He said a large cell was at our 2 o'clock, so we maintained a steady course. Just when I thought it couldn't get any worse, we popped out of the clouds, and I could see the light of dawn coming up in the east. Even better, though, I saw clear, blue sky and a straight shot to Singapore.

We delivered the patient, and no one was injured during the flight. We were fortunate to break out in the clear when we did and make it to Singapore without further incident. This trip reinforced three things about naval aviation:

• Know your NATOPS procedures. The malfunctions we faced were straightforward; however, we had no time to pull out the book and to go through the procedures step-by-step.

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• Through careful engineering, our aircraft are designed to keep us flying under extreme circumstances. Our aircraft have numerous safety and backup features.

• ORM works. Faced with the forecast weather and the critical condition of the patient, there was no question the benefits outweighed the risks. We discussed the weather before takeoff and noted it was typical for this part of the world. An evaluation of the weather is part of our ORM process to determine whether a mission can be completed.

LCdr. Pereboom flies with VP-4.