



A Normal Flight With a

Sandy Ending

Photo by PH3 Mark J. Rebilas. Composite.

By Ltjg. Jill Dougherty

I was the radar operator on a mission over Iraq during the early, critical phase of Operation Iraqi Freedom. My Hawkeye crew of five was providing the critical link between the troops on the ground and their airborne support. Scheduled for 4.7 hours, we just had turned over responsibilities to a follow-on crew and were headed back to USS *Abraham Lincoln* (CVN 72). The pilots had hawked our fuel state the entire flight; we had enough gas for a normal recovery.

Marshal set us up for a Case II recovery because the sandstorm brewing over Iraq hadn't

reached the Arabian Gulf with its full intensity. We held in the stack while the deck folks fought visibility problems that were not passed to us. Finally, the copilot, the carrier-aircraft-plane commander, was forced to call priority fuel to marshal. At the same time, marshal switched to a Case III recovery, and we heard, "601, your signal is bingo."

Without a second thought, the pilots turned toward our divert, Shaikh Isa, Bahrain, which was said to have VFR conditions. We immediately took bingo profile, squawked 7700, and started talking to Bahrain Center. To stay on the safe side, the copilot asked for updated

Marshal set us up for a Case II recovery because the sandstorm brewing over Iraq hadn't reached the Arabian Gulf with its full intensity.

weather for Bahrain International and Shaikh Isa. Neither option sounded appealing, as the visibility at both airfields was fast approaching zero, with virtually no ceiling. To make matters worse, they did not have published approaches the E-2C could use. We also realized with Shaikh Isa IMC, our bingo numbers were not sufficient, and we actually were proceeding below bingo fuel.

The pilots mulled over the pros and cons of landing at either field, considering distance, available nav aids, ground services, and the weather. We decided on the lesser of the two evils: Shaikh Isa, which had VORTAC and VOR DME approaches. Bahrain Center had called 200 to 300 meters visibility. We decided to fly the approach, using only our viable navigation assets for a field landing: TACAN, GPS, and radar altimeter.

At this point, the crew realized we might have to bail out or ditch the aircraft. We decided it would be safer to point the aircraft over water and bail out. We had enough gas for two approaches and a climb to a safe altitude before jumping. The uncertainty of getting a visual on the runway weighed heavily in our thoughts. We broke out the pocket checklist and went over the steps in preparing to bail out.

Talking to approach control, the copilot asked for vectors to a short final. We followed the TACAN inbound, with as much help as we could get from the controller. He gave us vectors to intercept final at four miles. All we had left were the radar altimeter and the pilot's ability to fly a visual approach in a horrendous Middle Eastern dust storm. The copilot made one last radio call to make sure the field lights were on at full intensity, and then he tried to catch sight of something. The crew in the back made out the water at 100 feet and one mile out, but the pilots still couldn't see the runway.

Maintaining 100 feet on the radalt, the

pilots finally saw the runway off to the left, directly below, and reported the good news to the CIC crew. Quickly, the pilot banked to the left to line up with the runway, and he made an amazingly smooth landing. We landed with about 500 pounds of fuel per tank, with both FUEL LOW caution lights on—we had only 20 minutes of flight time left before flameout.

What did we learn? After holding in marshal for 15 minutes and going through two push-time delays, the pilots made it known they would be close to 2.0 on the ball. We did not know why we were being delayed, but we heard numerous aircraft being sent to the tanker. Our copilots' forceful priority-fuel call to marshal probably gave us an additional 300 to 400 pounds of fuel for the bingo.

As soon as we were signaled to bingo, we pointed our nose in the direction of the divert field without questioning the decision made by air ops. Even though we were unsure of the reason for diverting, we followed directions and bought ourselves several minutes' worth of fuel, as well as much needed time to get our ducks in a row.

Be familiar with the divers your ship has picked out for the air wing. We knew Shaikh Isa did not have an IFR approach we legally could use, yet the ship was considering it a divert for us.

What about bailing out? We started thinking about it early, which gave us time to prep our seats and to get into the proper mindset. We considered the 40-knot winds at the surface that would have made it difficult to control a parachute, as well as the low visibility, which would have made it difficult to conduct a timely search and rescue. We were fortunate, and the search and rescue was not necessary.

It turned out to be just another night in a tent at an Air Force base for us. 

Ltjg. Dougherty flies with VAW-113.