

# But NATOPS Says...



Ted Carlson

by LCdr. Todd Squire

I was the flight leader for a three-plane flyoff from Hill Air Force Base to NAS Whidbey Island. The flight was the last leg of a transatlantic that had started in Aviano, Italy, four days earlier.

We briefed in accordance with NATOPS, took off and joined up. About 160 miles out of Hill, my wingman told me he had a combined-hydraulic-system failure. I gave him the lead and joined on him for a visual inspection. As I got closer to the aircraft, I could see the keel of the aircraft was soaked with hydraulic fluid.

I have always briefed that the aircrew in the wing aircraft during an emergency would shut up and offer whatever assistance was requested. The lead aircraft had some decisions to make. We were in visual range of Mountain Home AFB, but it was closed for the Fourth of July holiday. The lead crew weighed their options and decided to return to Hill. We had just taken off from there, the weather was beautiful, and the gear was in battery.

We detached the third aircraft to return to Whidbey, while my wingman and I headed to Hill. I didn't think it would be a big deal: My wingman would blow down the gear and take a trap. It didn't quite turn out that way.

My wingman electrically lowered the flaps without incident. He slowed to 150 KIAS to actuate the emergency-gear blow-down system. The mainmounts came down perfectly, but the nose gear came down to a trail position. With more than 2,000 hours in the Prowler and 2,500 total

flight time, I had never seen this configuration before. My wingman reported that he had the mainmounts down and locked, but the nose gear was barber poled. Not having much else to say, I told him I had to agree with that analysis of the landing-gear indications.

Having dealt with two emergency checklists, our wingman had another to go through. He tried to yaw the aircraft, then apply positive and negative G. I had never seen a piece of landing gear sway so much in the wind. It stayed in the trail position. We gave our wingman the opportunity to land first, knowing we would have to divert to Salt Lake International if the gear collapsed on landing. He decided that we should land first, since we had very little to offer him as a wingman. We landed, and he followed. Just as we expected, the nose gear collapsed on landing, but the arrestment was successful, and the aircraft stopped on centerline.

Mishap investigators found the blow-down system had been rigged improperly, and the nitrogen bottle that provides the pressure didn't fully actuate. I was interested to discover that the emergency blow-down system can be actuated a second time. NATOPS, as well as all the training I had received, told me this system was a one-time-use item—either it worked, or it didn't. The investigation revealed that most maintenance personnel knew the system could be actuated a second time if the nitrogen bottle did not completely discharge the first time. 🛩️

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