



By Lt. Gregory Sutton

Before Operation Iraqi Freedom kicked off, our ready room had discussed how we would deal with emergencies during combat operations. When an aircraft had a system degradation or emergency and couldn't be flown, our options were to use a spare aircraft or to find an airborne replacement to cover the mission. However, because of 24-hour combat ops, there weren't enough E-2Cs airborne to cover either option.

We recognized the necessity of having an airborne command-and-control (C2) platform. An E-2C coordinates targets for our pointy-nose, bomb-dropping friends or directs the pilots to ground-controlling agencies for close-air support in defense of our ground troops. The Hawkeye crews also maintain blue-on-blue deconfliction, known as airborne battlefield command-and-control communications (ABCCC). We also may have to fly during aircraft emergencies that call for landing as soon as practical, or even landing as soon as possible. Our ops situation was a necessary reality during wartime; to get the right air assets to the right place. On some occasions,

we were ready, and did accept a certain level of risk, which, under normal peaceful conditions, we never would have accepted.

Several times I had a "windshield heater element failure/cracked windshield" emergency. Depending on whether the problem is with the outer pane or the inner pane determines if we try to land as soon as practical (outer pane), or land as soon as possible (inner pane). The terms "practical" and "possible" became open to interpretation during war.

On one of my flights during the first few days of the war, the pilot's left quarter-panel windshield cracked while at altitude, heading to station over Kuwait. The crack continued to grow and eventually looked like a spider web. The pilot thought the cracks probably were caused by a heater-element failure, and they were on the outside pane.

We stepped through the emergency procedure and discussed the situation. Because the cracks were on the outside, the EP says to land as soon as practical. We didn't consider our situation as severe, and, because the mission was critical, we proceeded toward station. The cracks didn't get worse, and we later returned on board.

A few weeks into the war, about the time when Baghdad fell, the number of bombs dropped rapidly decreased. Our role shifted from one of ABCCC to checking in aircraft in the south area-of-responsibility (AOR). The new check-in mission helped alleviate the AWACS workload. Our new mission was important but not as critical as our earlier tasking. The level of risk we should accept went back to normal levels. Our command recognized that if the plane was down for maintenance, the plane was down, and emergencies were priority over the mission—the same necessity wasn't present.

About this time, the war was winding down, and I was the mission commander during another flight with a windshield incident. About 20 minutes after we had launched off the boat in the North Arabian Gulf, we headed to on-station in Iraq as the south AOR C2 check-in platform. While still close to Kuwait, our crew in the back of the aircraft focused on setting up for the mission and relieving the other E-2C. Unexpectedly, the copilot called on the ICS for everybody to don their oxygen masks. We hesitated for a second, unsure if we correctly had heard him, but then we quickly donned the masks while asking about the situation. He told us the pilot's front windshield was cracked badly, and we were going to descend and return to the carrier. The descent isn't part of the procedure, but the windshield appeared to be severely cracked, and the pilots were worried about explosive decompression if it caved in. Immediately after we had donned our masks, I had the radar operator watch our scopes to provide ownship flight-following for traffic while we descended. The air-control officer assisted with communications, notifying units we were declaring an in-flight emergency and would not get on station. Meanwhile, the pilots and I (as the combat-information-control officer) stepped through the EP.

We leveled at a lower altitude, and the other two NFOs and I removed and restowed our masks because they weren't necessary. The mask is one less thing we would have to remove in the event of a ditch or bailout. The pilots kept their masks on, with visors down, in case the windshield shattered and shards of glass flew through the cockpit. Because of the numerous cracks, the pilots weren't sure if any cracks were on the

inside pane. The cracks continued to increase as the pilots saw scorch marks and air bubbles—indicative of delamination of the adhesive layer that holds the two panes together.

As we flew toward the carrier, we asked for a Hawkeye rep to coordinate our return. We passed information on the cracked windshield to our rep and said that we were RTB. What we got in return was perceived, by us, to be pressure from the rep to return to the mission. From our viewpoint, that idea was not a good one. Our crew discussed the options, and we agreed that returning to the ship or diverting to an airfield were the only two acceptable options.

Because we had plenty of fuel, we were willing to remain overhead until the next recovery. Fortunately, the Air Boss recognized the severity of the situation and provided a ready deck upon our arrival. We landed without incident.

The postflight inspection indicated all of the cracks were on the outside pane, which, according to the EP, calls for landing as soon as practical. However, because of the obvious delamination, which had not been evident in-flight from the cockpit, the EP calls for a landing as soon as possible.

The flight was a good lesson on risk management. The incident occurred during a decidedly vague transition period in the war when squadron aircrew started talking about reducing the level of risk they previously had been willing to accept.


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