

# Running Out of **OPTIONS**



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*By Lt. Brandt Moslener*

It had been a while since I had flown an eight-hour burner in the P-3. Most of our flights out of NAS Patuxent River are only three to four hours, but we had a target-of-opportunity off the Jacksonville coast, and I felt like I was back in the fleet.

I had my lunch, coffee and water. Bingo bag? Nah, the times I take a bingo bag are the times I don't get home. I had a chart bag with every approach plate along the coast, south of Pax River. We didn't require an alternate for our recovery, but we put Dover AFB on the flight plan anyway and checked NOTAMS. We took off at noon, with the weather right at minimums, 200-foot ceiling and half-mile visibility. All this bad weather was supposed to blow out around 1800, and the forecast for our 2000 recovery called for an 8,000-foot ceiling.

We had a successful mission and headed for home when we reached our bingo fuel. We caught a tailwind and had planned our fuel con-

servatively—we planned to land at Pax with 10,000 pounds of JP. Although we like to be on the deck with 8,000 pounds, today we had kept a fuel log and dipped the fuel tanks before takeoff, so we actually could go down to 6,000 pounds. Fuel wasn't going to be an issue tonight. I don't like to plan on 6,000 pounds anyway, since the fuel-quantity system is subject to error at lower fuel loads.

Everything looked good until we copied ATIS about 100 miles out. I caught the tail end of the observation and thought I heard ceiling and visibility were 100 and a quarter. Well, that must be for another field because Pax is supposed to have an 8,000-foot ceiling. So I double-checked the frequency and listened to the entire report. Sure enough, Pax was sitting right at the approach minimums. I guess all that bad weather at takeoff decided to stick around southern Maryland for the night. Not a big deal—yet.

We called metro to find a good alternate. Since there are plenty of fields close to Pax, I figured we could shoot a couple approaches, and, if we didn't break out, we would head over to Dover, Andrews, or Oceana. Well, I wouldn't be telling this story if it was that easy. All my favorite fields also were at minimums, which was when it got a little frustrating to deal with metro. We were getting closer to Pax, so I told metro we needed to know where it was clear. I needed a field I knew we could get into; metro, on the other hand, wanted to know what my criteria was and where I wanted them to look. I replied we needed a 500-foot ceiling and three miles visibility and to check Atlantic City, N.J., and Willow Grove, Pa. A few minutes later, which seemed like an eternity, metro came back and read me the entire observation for each field. I hoped for a more subjective analysis of the weather, something like, "It's clear about 50 miles west of Pax."

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Anyway, Willow Grove reported an 800-foot ceiling. "There's our field," I thought. "I know we can get into Willow Grove tonight." We didn't have the approach plate, but I figured we would have ATC read us the decision height for the PAR.

We had enough gas for one approach at Pax, which was landing runway 32. We actually were coming from the south, so the approach really wouldn't take much gas. We got our clearance to Willow Grove in case of a missed approach. We didn't see a thing at Pax, and we climbed out on our way to Willow Grove. As we executed the missed approach, the off-duty pilot got the charts ready, and the nav called home plate.

We had 10,500 pounds of gas, and it was about a 45-minute flight. It was going to be tight, but we felt confident we would get into Willow Grove, at least until I called base ops. I wanted to give them a heads up, tell them we were coming and make sure their PAR was up. Much to our

surprise and disappointment, the PAR was out of service. The ASR went down to 800 feet, with a height-above-touchdown of 500 feet. The ceiling still was reported at 800 feet, which gave us a 300-foot window. Still trying to think one step ahead, the nav was on the radio finding another field if we needed it. Things got too busy, and we were setting up for the approach before we could find a good field.

As we got closer to the MDA, I got a little nervous. We still were in the goo at the missed approach point and had no option, except to climb out. As we went missed approach with about 7,000 pounds of gas, ATC asked if we wanted to go to Northeast Philadelphia Airport, because they had an ILS. Having grown up in the area, I vaguely was familiar with the field. I knew the airport handled a lot of business aviation, and I thought the runway would be long enough for a P-3. Low on gas, we were running out of options. The field was only 15 miles south, so we declared minimum fuel and requested vectors and the localizer frequency. I asked for the final-approach course, and some airline pilot, sounding like the voice of God, said "240" over the radio. We lined up on the localizer, intercepted the glideslope, and, with a sigh of relief, broke out around 500 feet. As we taxied to our parking spot, I saw 6,300 pounds on the fuel totalizer.

As I sat in my hotel room that night, I went over the flight and the decisions we had made. I didn't, and still don't, feel we made any wrong decisions. We exercised solid crew coordination and made the best decisions with the information we had at the time. Are there things I'll do differently in the future? Sure. If I takeoff at minimums, I'll keep a closer eye on the weather, even if it's supposed to clear out a couple hours before recovery. I may have to talk on the scratchy HF radio, but it sure beats surprises.

Someone with a lot of experience also told me that he usually carries an approach plate surrounding his destination in every direction. Seems like a good idea. Our operations department also got with Metro and gave them feedback concerning alternate field selection when an aircraft is fuel-critical. 

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