

That Sinking Feeling

by Lt. Donald L. Gaines

The day started like any other spring-time SOCAL day: lots of high-level clouds and a slight possibility of rain, according to the weather-guessers.

North Island Metro said the ceiling wasn't forecast to go any lower than 2,000 feet, with a slim chance of rain in the vicinity. As the day's FCF crew, we checked in with maintenance control to find that our only task for the day was a Phase B FCF, typically a 15-minute flight. We briefed and were headed out to the aircraft for preflight when the SDO informed us we were assigned to a collateral mission first, spinning backup for an H-3 VIP

transfer to Camp Pendleton. Not a problem, Semper Gumby is the name of the game for us.

We re-briefed, preflighted, and spun up the backup bird. Once the H-3 was airborne, we switched over to the FCF bird. One of the vibe wires was bad; we had to shut down for a half-hour so the maintainers could replace the faulty wire.

Once again, the SDO changed our game plan. Now we had to take the VIP backup bird up to Camp Pendleton and act as chase aircraft for the H-3's VIP return flight to North Island. Off we went. The weather was as advertised until we hit Del Mar, where the ceiling quickly deteriorated



below 1,000 feet. As we continued north, we found the cloud layer at 600 feet and visibility below three miles in rain off Camp Pendleton. Once on station, we talked to Long Rifle (the area controlling agency) and were informed that the base was currently under quiet hours. Our options were to continue circling or to land at one of pads along the coastline. Not wanting to linger in the worsening conditions, we opted for the latter and sat on deck for about 20 minutes until we saw the H-3 depart. We followed in loose trail and had a hard time keeping the lead aircraft in sight at any distance greater than about a mile because of the rain. Once south of La Jolla, the weather began to clear, and the rest of the flight home was uneventful.

We found our FCF bird ready and waiting. We quickly changed gears and had the FCF in hover checks. While on the pad and ready to begin the forward-flight portion of the FCF, we saw ATIS was way off with their weather report. ATIS said the conditions were 2000/5, but we could tell it was 1000/3 at best and getting worse. We called Metro again, and the forecaster reported that ATIS was being updated, and that the weather was 1000/3. He used the phrase “marginal VFR.” I wondered what that was, but because the FCF flight portion was less than 15 minutes, I decided to press on. I figured we could shoot out toward the bay, cut across the strand four miles out, and then head back in. However, once we hit the four-mile mark, the run was only half complete. I decided to continue down the bay and called up Imperial Beach tower to coordinate working in their airspace. They told us the field was currently IFR, and nobody was allowed in or out. We decided to cross at the comm station and head out west. I started to get that sinking feeling. As we crossed the beach line, Imperial Beach tower called us requesting a PIREP, and we reported 500/1. The crew chief reported the vibe run complete and said we could head back.

So I dialed up ATIS and all we got was static, meaning the information was being updated again. That sinking feeling got worse. As we continued into North Island, I called tower and reported my position at six miles to the southwest. Tower quickly replied with “Sideflare Seven Zero, state your exact location and ident immediately.” That sinking feeling now felt like a ton of bricks weigh-

ing on me. I complied, reporting my position on the 190 at five miles.

“Sideflare Seven Zero, you have an SH-60B at three-quarters to one mile at same altitude,” they replied. “Do you have that traffic in sight?”

I called negative contact right away and stated that I was climbing to 500 feet. Tower told us we could contact Approach for a PAR back in, or we could hold for special VFR. Noting that we were only five miles from the field, I chose the special VFR entry and circled over our current position, waiting for clearance in the traffic. We briefed special VFR procedures and completed the landing checklist. I made sure the copilot and crew chief were both backing me up on the instruments. The SH-60B ahead of us called the field in sight at three miles, and tower cleared us in behind him. However, at three miles, we still did not have the field in sight. We crept down to 200 feet and at two miles were still without a visual on the field. At about 1 mile, I finally caught sight of the rocky beach line and some runway approach lighting. Once over the runway threshold, we told tower we didn’t have the field in sight until we were at less than a mile, and at that time the aircraft behind us canceled its special VFR entry and requested an approach instead.

Our debrief was lengthy. First, we let the weather put us in a bad situation. We all knew what was heading our way after spending the short amount of time in the rain north of Camp Pendleton. I let the fact that the FCF should have been done quickly cloud my judgment. I should have just canceled the remainder of the flight and let the next day’s FCF crew finish the little bit left. Once I was already in a bind, I let myself be lulled into a worse one because I was only five miles out. I should have just taken an approach back in.

Some things we did right, though. We always acted as a crew. My copilot was quick to pull out the “blue brains” to reference the special-VFR course rules. My copilot and crewchief kept me honest on the instruments. We never let the situation get out of hand.

All day I had thought I was paying close attention to the weather, when in fact I was wearing the “mission-completion” blinders. Unfortunately, I didn’t realize this until I was safe on deck and back in the ready room. 🦅

Lt. Gaines flies with HC-11