

We were flying our FRS SH-60B back from Portland, Ore., to NAS North Island after a terrific weekend at an air show. The level of experience varied widely throughout the crew. I was the least experienced, a CAT I jaygee with only a few dozen hours in type. The other student was a CAT 1A lieutenant commander with tons of hours in H-2s, making his transition to the SH-60B. Our instructor was a cruise-experienced lieutenant with close to 1,000 hours in type. The aircrewman was a salty AW1 (is there any other kind?) with more hours in helos than I had in the Navy.

It was a fine, CAVU Sunday as we launched out of Portland. The leg down to Klamath Falls was notable only for the spectacular scenery. On landing, we had the AW1 take care of servicing the helo while the three officers went in to get weather and file. I was going to be flying this leg and was looking forward to a few hours of stick time. I got the weather while the instructor filed our next leg to Fresno for me. We manned up and launched.

When we got about 30 minutes out of Fresno, I flipped through the *IFR Supplement*, looking for the Fresno ANG base frequency. I discovered they didn't operate on Sundays. I asked the instructor if he was aware of this, and he shrugged his shoulders. I hailed the ANG guys, and they confirmed my suspicions. I asked if they knew any other place for us to get gas, and they told us the FBO was closed as well.

After a few minutes of confusion and finger-pointing, we decided to head over the mountains to Monterey. After a quick call to ATC, we received our new VFR clearance and turned west. Our fuel was going to be close, but the weather was great. We had to be back that night so the helo could fly tomorrow morning. No sweat!

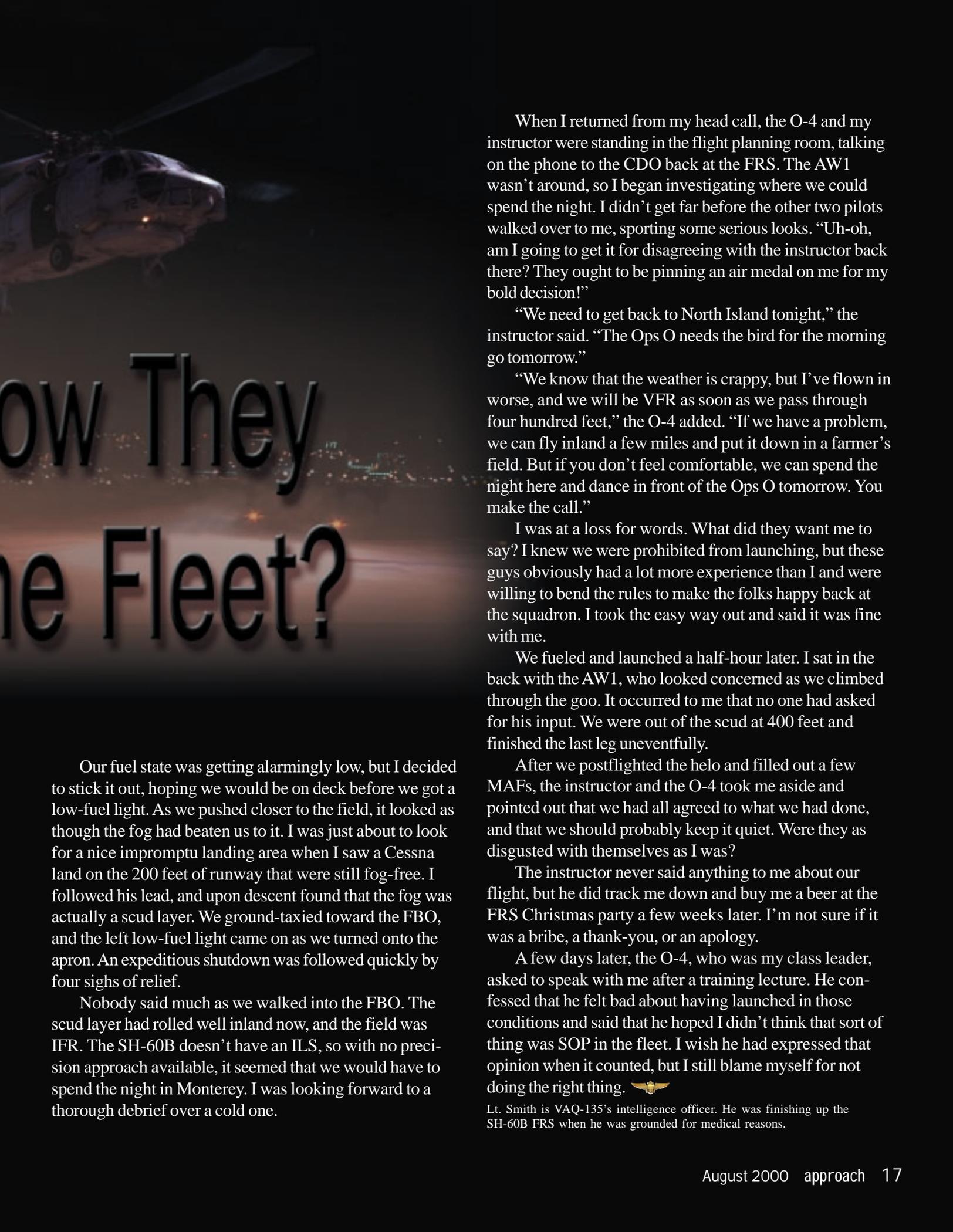
As we eased over the mountains, the fuel state became our main concern. We were burning it more quickly than we had expected, and the cockpit grew quiet. The O-4 in the back kept his thoughts to himself, as did the AW1.

The familiar sweep of Monterey Bay came into view. A thick layer of fog was rolling in off the water, and the coastline had already vanished in many places. We had flown into Monterey on our trip north, and I had been flying on that leg as well. I remembered the airfield as being on the southeast side of the bay, and the fog was quickly socking in that area. To top it off, we couldn't pick up the field's NDB.

The instructor had been navigating over the mountains with Doppler and had the coordinates of the airport plugged into the system. On his tacnav display, the aircraft's position indicator was directly over the airfield icon, and he told me to look below us for the airfield. We were at 4,000 feet, and there was no fog below us. I could tell that we were at least 8 to 9 miles from where I knew the field was, yet the instructor insisted that we were over it and that I start a descent. We had lost radio contact with ATC because of the mountains, and we had no nav aids. Here was a situation we hadn't covered in aircrew training!

I pointed out that we hadn't had a good position for the tacnav system in well over an hour, and that Doppler was sure to drift. The instructor stuck to his guns about our current position. I was at the controls when I finally said to him, "You can jump out here if you want, but I'm going to go land at the airfield." He said nothing, and I pressed on to where I knew the field to be.

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Our fuel state was getting alarmingly low, but I decided to stick it out, hoping we would be on deck before we got a low-fuel light. As we pushed closer to the field, it looked as though the fog had beaten us to it. I was just about to look for a nice impromptu landing area when I saw a Cessna land on the 200 feet of runway that were still fog-free. I followed his lead, and upon descent found that the fog was actually a scud layer. We ground-taxied toward the FBO, and the left low-fuel light came on as we turned onto the apron. An expeditious shutdown was followed quickly by four sighs of relief.

Nobody said much as we walked into the FBO. The scud layer had rolled well inland now, and the field was IFR. The SH-60B doesn't have an ILS, so with no precision approach available, it seemed that we would have to spend the night in Monterey. I was looking forward to a thorough debrief over a cold one.

When I returned from my head call, the O-4 and my instructor were standing in the flight planning room, talking on the phone to the CDO back at the FRS. The AW1 wasn't around, so I began investigating where we could spend the night. I didn't get far before the other two pilots walked over to me, sporting some serious looks. "Uh-oh, am I going to get it for disagreeing with the instructor back there? They ought to be pinning an air medal on me for my bold decision!"

"We need to get back to North Island tonight," the instructor said. "The Ops O needs the bird for the morning go tomorrow."

"We know that the weather is crappy, but I've flown in worse, and we will be VFR as soon as we pass through four hundred feet," the O-4 added. "If we have a problem, we can fly inland a few miles and put it down in a farmer's field. But if you don't feel comfortable, we can spend the night here and dance in front of the Ops O tomorrow. You make the call."

I was at a loss for words. What did they want me to say? I knew we were prohibited from launching, but these guys obviously had a lot more experience than I and were willing to bend the rules to make the folks happy back at the squadron. I took the easy way out and said it was fine with me.

We fueled and launched a half-hour later. I sat in the back with the AW1, who looked concerned as we climbed through the goo. It occurred to me that no one had asked for his input. We were out of the scud at 400 feet and finished the last leg uneventfully.

After we postflighted the helo and filled out a few MAFs, the instructor and the O-4 took me aside and pointed out that we had all agreed to what we had done, and that we should probably keep it quiet. Were they as disgusted with themselves as I was?

The instructor never said anything to me about our flight, but he did track me down and buy me a beer at the FRS Christmas party a few weeks later. I'm not sure if it was a bribe, a thank-you, or an apology.

A few days later, the O-4, who was my class leader, asked to speak with me after a training lecture. He confessed that he felt bad about having launched in those conditions and said that he hoped I didn't think that sort of thing was SOP in the fleet. I wish he had expressed that opinion when it counted, but I still blame myself for not doing the right thing. 

Lt. Smith is VAQ-135's intelligence officer. He was finishing up the SH-60B FRS when he was grounded for medical reasons.