

From Combat to Casale

by Ltjg. Mark Keller

A month into my first deployment, we had been flying strikes over Kosovo for two weeks. We had been frustrated by bad weather, but this night promised to be different. The skies were clear, and we had a juicy target. I was more than ready to enjoy my first taste of combat.

After a nice, solid cat stroke, our F-14 was off into the night. I called airborne, and my pilot immediately told me he had a spoiler light that wouldn't reset. The F-14 uses differential horizontal stabilizers for primary roll control, so we were in no immediate danger, but this was not a condition to take into combat. I told departure that we had a problem and would take high holding to troubleshoot. I quickly found a couple of popped circuit breakers and reset them. They popped again, so I reset them a second time. Maybe I hadn't pushed them in all the way. They popped a third time, and I knew we were done for the night.

We had more than enough gas to hold overhead for our scheduled recovery, but marshal had a different plan for us. The controller had been pestering us for details from the beginning, despite my repeated instructions to "stand by" since we were going through the PCL for options. We called for a rep, and he said they were going to bring us in on this recovery. Marshal then started giving vectors. We checked controllability, and the aircraft alarmingly rolled off to the right as soon as the flaps started down. My pilot told me that he had to put in full left stick to maintain level flight. I broke out my flashlight and looked at the spoilers. Two of the right spoilers were stuck partly up. The aircraft was still controllable with the flaps up, but

there's nothing like a night, no-flap approach at the boat, especially with a heavy load-out.

I wasn't too worried, because we'd already had an uneventful, no-flap approach a few weeks earlier. We called for a "no-flapper" and dumped 15,000 pounds of gas (minimizing our gross weight, because of wind-over-the-deck requirements).

We continued to dump fuel while we descended to 1,200 feet, while chasing our continually changing final bearing all over the Mediterranean. The ship was having trouble finding wind for our 150-knot approach. At seven miles behind the boat, I remembered that I had not set up my data link for the ACLS. Putting my copilot scan on hold, I unclipped my Grimes light so I could see the unlit control box. It seemed like only a few seconds before my pilot screamed, "Altitude!" as he selected full power and got back on parameters. We had been at 700 feet, descending at 200 feet per minute! He'd had his head down, trying to sort out a fuel imbalance that he hadn't mentioned. This hop was not fun, and I was glad we were about to get aboard.

However, we got waved off at a mile for insufficient wind over the deck. We had called 4.5 on the ball, which was 200 pounds above bingo, but 1,200 pounds above tank state. We were instructed to climb for a quick drink from an S-3. We drilled straight ahead for about a minute, looking for the tanker on our radar before I caved in and asked for a steer. It turned out that the tanker was several miles behind us. Marshal asked our state, which was 4.3, and our tower rep came up and told us to divert for an arrested landing at our divert field, Casale Airport in Italy. He also reminded us to prepare for a shore-based landing, since we hadn't landed on anything but the boat for a month. We started a bingo profile to the north, and we were cleared to switch with a "sweet lock" and "sweet comms."

What do you think neither one of us had handy on our kneeboard? You got it—divert information. I broke out my new hand-held GPS and fumbled around for what seemed like an eternity, before I could figure out how to get the TACAN channel



Photo modification by Allan Amen

and approach frequency we needed. Meanwhile, my pilot got the TACAN channel from the S-3 that we were supposed to tank with, while he asked me for the bingo altitude for an 80-mile divert. We eventually got to 24,000 feet and pointed at the TACAN. We established comms (using the freq that was on my GPS) with an Italian controller who undoubtedly was wondering why someone squawking 7700 was coming at him without checking in.

The next problem was figuring out if we could make the arrested landing that our rep had mandated. Neither one of us was sure if the field had arresting gear, so we asked the Italian approach controller. His English was every bit as good as my Italian. By the time we had given up on making him understand our question, we were one mile from the TACAN and wondering where the field was. My pilot finally figured out that the arresting gear was for overruns only, so we decided to skip the arrested landing and concentrate on finding the

runway. It turned out that the threshold was displaced from the TACAN four miles to the north.

The controller said, “Four miles,” and we spotted two parallel rows of white lights embedded in a sea of other white lights on our nose. We convinced each other that must be the runway and managed to make a delightfully uneventful min-fuel landing.

When our maintenance troops got to the beach the next day, they put power on our jet, reset the popped circuit breakers, and immediately had a major electrical fire. Twenty circuit breakers popped, producing lots of smoke. We ended up enjoying the hospitality of the Italian government for a week, while our brethren on the ship were engulfed in battle over Kosovo.

Three lessons. Never let a controller pressure you into a bad situation. Never hold in a popped circuit breaker or reset it more than once. And never go flying without all your divert information ready to pull out at a moment’s notice. 🇺🇸

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