

We had completed a Cobra detachment at NAS Fallon and planned to get on the boat the following week. Things were hectic as we packed up the maintenance shop. It made logistical sense to have the maintenance personnel daily and turn-around the birds, get on the road, and then have the pilots button up the aircraft after preflighting. Operations weren't smooth at Fallon, and the det OinC (with whom I had been combat-crew) felt pressure to get ready for the boat. (We can do this; that's what we're paid for, ain't it?)

We planned the route to take us near the Lake Tahoe area, where we would weave our way through the passes—average height 7,000 feet, with some mountain peaks over 10,000 feet—and continue west. After checking our fuel calculations, we would have plenty of gas at our destination, but just in case, we found an airport that had fuel, and we needed to contact the FBO. We made seven phone calls but couldn't find someone to give us gas, so we gave up, and pressed without a PPR or confirmation the FBO was open. (We don't need gas anyway, we'll land with almost 30 minutes of fuel.)

Our brief from the weather-guesser showed any clouds in our path would dissipate before we reached the Sierra Nevada Mountains. We looked at the radar screen and agreed with the weather briefing. The freezing level was between 6,000 and 7,000 feet. We filed VFR and pressed on. (If we stay clear of visible moisture through the pass, no problem.)

Since we'd been flying together for a while, the crew brief concentrated on the route, frequencies and controlled airspace but not on weather contingencies. Both aircraft had experienced, reliable pilots able to make the right decisions. (Hmm...)

We preflighted, started and then learned Dash 2 had a hydraulics problem, and he shut down to troubleshoot. We

knew weather wasn't improving at Fallon. They went next door for help, while we departed the area and headed west. (The sooner I get there and settled in, the better.)

Well, we got to the mountains and quickly realized the front had not progressed east as forecasted but had pushed up against the west side of the mountain chain and stopped. As we looked at the clouds, I could tell they went high, but the pass still looked workable—we pressed. I hadn't signed for the aircraft, and since we hadn't briefed a solid bad-weather game plan, I didn't have a clear idea what the OinC or PIC were thinking. By this time on the route, there was no fooling either of us since snow and dark clouds blocked the pass. What was great, though, was the crystal-clear, blue sky over us and to the east. Then we had a great idea: See how high the tops are, go VFR on top, and when the weather breaks-up on the west face of the mountains, descend and continue VFR. (Sure, we can always turn back. What's bingo fuel from here?)

Up we spiralled—Angels 8, 8.5, 9, 9.5, 10 (Hey, doesn't OPNAV 3710 say something about not flying above 10,000 feet without a nose hose?), 11, 12, 13, 14,



By Anonymous

Up We Spiraled

all the way to 14,300 feet. (I wonder what the service ceiling on this thing is? Flies a bit different up here.) For the stiff-wingers, most Cobra drivers don't relish flying above 500-feet AGL. Yes, we were CAVU on top, but below, the weather wasn't getting any better—we pressed. Even after almost forcing my eyeballs out of my head for another 15 minutes, I didn't see a sucker hole for miles. I felt a tightness in my chest but didn't know if it was the onset of hypoxia or an anxiety attack. As we tracked our progress on the navigation system and TACAN cuts, the PIC expressed concern about our fuel state. I was blissfully ignorant because you can't scan the gauge from the front seat.

Finally, the cloud tops began to come down and we descended, but still with no sign of terra firma, just a floor full of cotton as far as you'd like to look. As the fuel got lower, it became clear we had to land, and soon. The only solution was to shoot a TACAN approach to the field where we didn't have the PPR or even knew if there was fuel. The PIC took the controls and handed me the terminal FLIP pub while setting up his instrument scan to intercept the IAF.

We still were unable to get weather at our destination and, on top of that, we didn't have an alternate (I hate when this happens).

Fortunately, as we descended through the freezing layer, the weather broke, and our sucker hole appeared. From there, we picked our way through the scattered, occasionally broken clouds, to find our destination and landed.

On postflight, I opened the No. 1 engine bay and discovered the access panel for the tail-rotor drive shaft had not been secured. It was resting against the opening where you can access the shaft. If that panel had decided to shift into the access hole or against the drive shaft, we would've lost our tail-rotor thrust and crashed. That could've been fatal on a VFR day in the pattern at home field. What would we have done at 14,300 feet, over mountainous terrain, while VFR on top? What could we do with any "land as soon as pos-

sible"

under those conditions? Probably kill ourselves.

On debrief, we looked at the FLIP pub to check how the approach would've worked out, and realized there wasn't an approach at the divert. I still to this day don't know which approach plate we were looking at.

I knew we were writing an *Approach* article as we climbed to go VFR-on-top. Why? Our can-do mentality, a bad case of get-there-itis, overestimating our ability, poor crew coordination, little planning for contingencies, and not trusting our instincts all played a factor. If something doesn't feel right, it probably isn't. Never assume; get a confirmation on what you expect. If you think you're that good, you probably aren't. ✈️



Helo photo by Cpl. E.M. Thorn
Photo-composite by Allan Amen