



Blind Phrog in the Fog

by Ltjg. Ryan Barnes

Helo photo by Lt. William M. Roark
Photo-composite by Allan Amen

In April, I was in a fleet squadron, scheduled to do my first mission that didn't involve training. I was excited, because I had just finished the CH-46 replacement-pilot syllabus a month prior. A new HAC, two crewmen and I were to transport 12 civilian passengers from NAS North Island to a multi-spot ship about 10 miles off the coast of San Diego, then pick up a few more at another ship a few miles north for transport back to the air station.

We called the ship before departure, and they reported the weather as 800 feet broken and 4 miles visibility. The weather looked even better outside the briefing spaces. In the brief, we discussed flying out to the ship at the standard

altitude of 500 feet. Every light appeared green, so we finished our preflight and taxied to the terminal to pick up the passengers.

On the way, we all noticed an odor most commonly associated with sticking or hot brakes. We stopped for a few minutes to investigate but found nothing out of the ordinary. Although the odor had vanished, we continued to focus on it as we taxied to the terminal to pick up the passengers. The passengers climbed onboard. Listening to ATIS, we recorded the same weather as before and departed from the field.

Climbing to 500 feet, we leveled off and got a sweet lock on the first ship's TACAN. About 2 miles from the field, the cloud deck started to solidify and lower. We descended to remain VFR. Then, at 300 feet, we started a climb through the layer to the reported tops. At 1,200 feet, as expected, we broke through into clear skies. As we continued out to the

ship, one of the crew in back told us the same thing had happened on the previous day. That crew had just flown circles around the

ship's position until they found a hole in the layer. With our comfort level higher than it should have been, we continued out over a completely solid deck. We radioed inbound to the ship and requested the current weather report, for which we had to wait an unusually long time. A 400-foot ceiling with 2 miles visibility was the eventual report.

We circled for 10 minutes but found no break in the layer. After the ship reported no other vessels in the area, the HAC took the controls and told the crew that we were going to do a modified TACAN approach. We would cross over the ship, track outbound, and make a descending turn back to the ship, ending up below the 400-foot layer. We would then come up the stern of the ship for a landing.

Everything went as expected until we passed below 400 feet and found ourselves still in a solid layer. We slowed our descent below 300 feet, and our air speed steadily decreased. The tension rose

as we descended through 200 feet at 20 knots, still in the thick of it. I rode the controls with the HAC, as our scans constantly switched between altitude and outside the aircraft. As we approached 150 feet, we leveled off. The ocean was barely visible directly below us, and visibility was zero in every other direction. The crewmen in the back reported the same. We continued inbound for a few minutes, dipping slightly below 150 feet (the altitude my alarm was set at) twice, with immediate corrections back to 150. We were basically holding a 150-foot hover in IMC. To make matters worse, I had everything I needed to know about the ship, except its height above the water. At one mile, we stopped the search and started a climb back up through the layer. Again we broke out at 1,200 feet. The ship reported hearing us pass close by on the starboard side. How close, we will never know.

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We cautiously proceeded to the next ship, hoping to find better weather, but learned that the weather there was 200 feet with one-half mile visibility. At this point, we decided to divert back to NAS North Island, rather than hold for the weather to clear. I logged a standard PAR to a safe landing, and we dropped the passengers back off at the terminal. As we taxied back to our line, the brakes locked up, and we had to air taxi to a spot for shutdown.

My first flight in my new squadron was quite a learning experience. I felt well-prepared, though I had obviously forgotten to bring very important information. Our desire to complete the mission, a faulty forecast, and not setting clear safety limits on our approach put our bird in a very dangerous position. To this day, we aren't sure how close our aircraft, with 16 people inside, came to blindly hitting the ship. I drew two lessons: Be prepared, and expect the worst. 

Ltjg. Barnes flies with HC-11.