

# Nevermo

by Cdr. Dave Delancey

Anyone who has spent time at NAF Atsugi knows all about the ravens. Thousands of them caw raucously, from the golf course to the flight line. They wake you every morning and are still at it every evening. Early last month, I could have sworn I heard one whisper, “Nevermore.”

I’m a Navy C-9 pilot, a 20-year commander in the Navy Reserve who also flies as a captain for an airline. My time is equally split between my civilian and military jobs. I spend months each year in Japan or Italy, flying passengers and cargo for the Navy.

Last month, we were tasked to fly from Atsugi to Phuket, Thailand, stay overnight, fly a leg to pick up a SEAL platoon, bring them back to Phuket, spend another night, and then return them to their forward deployed home base in Guam. This was an unusual but not unheard-of mission for a C-9.

The mission went fine all the way back to Phuket on the second night. Gas started to become an issue when we had both of the SEAL det crews and their combat cargo on board. That extra weight limited the amount of fuel we could carry to about 30,000 pounds (four and a half to five hours worth).

Three tropical depressions were beginning to stir in the Far East. One was up north, to the west of Korea; it wasn’t a factor. But one was sitting just to the west of the Philippines and was slowly drifting east toward Manila. The third, named Samoi, was spinning up to the northeast of Guam and sliding northwest. Its projected track would keep it 200 miles north of the island. Not forecasted, it soon would accelerate to super typhoon status.

Phuket, Thailand, is an international resort (where the movie “The Beach” was filmed), so while overseas communication was expensive, it wasn’t impossible. Worried about the weather, I made several long-distance calls to our scheduler and various weather agencies around the area. We would beat the first typhoon into Manila with a day to spare.

With the SEAL team on board, we departed Phuket airport early that morning. About 200 miles into the flight, the first thunderstorms started to appear, and we switched on the weather radar. It didn’t work. It had tested fine on the ground and in the air, but it wouldn’t show us the storms. We made the only decision we could and turned around to get it fixed. We carry our own mechanics with us, and an hour and a half later, back on the ground in Phuket, they found a broken wire. We fueled the aircraft and started off, now more than two hours late.

The weather into Manila was dicey but manageable. We used the radar to skirt the worst of the storms on our way in from the west, and found clearer weather as we approached the field. The leg took three hours and 40 minutes, and we

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landed with 6,500 pounds of fuel, just above the legal planning limit of 6,000 pounds.

Again we refueled. We were losing daylight by flying east, and it was now dusk in the Philippines. Again, I hauled out my credit card and called to recheck the weather. There was a chance of light rain later that evening in Guam, but we didn't expect any real problems. The next leg was projected to last three hours and 20 minutes, so we were confident we'd have fuel to spare. There are two major airports on Guam, even though it is a small island. This is important for a C-9, because almost every time we fly to an island, we don't have enough fuel to go anywhere else. That was certainly true this night. This leg was business as usual, legal by every naval aviation regulation. I would have flown it with my family in the back.

We took off in the deepening twilight, maneuvering to avoid the storms that the radar picked up with increasing frequency. A commercial pilot talked to us on an air-to-air common radio frequency; told us he had just taken off from Guam,

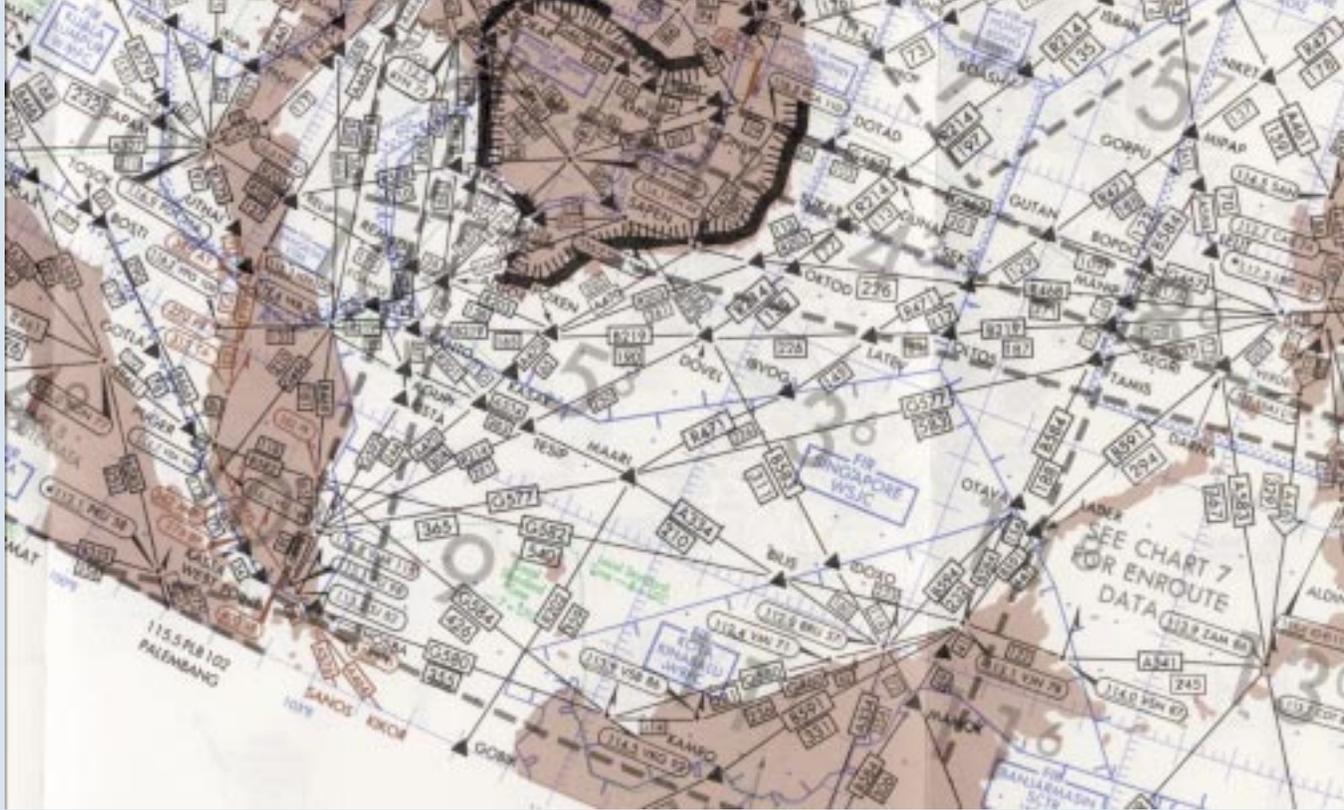
and that we should have no problems. We pressed on, oblivious to the havoc Samoi soon would unleash.

We approached Guam at 10 p.m. There was no ATIS—the field had closed because of the worsening weather. Approach control was still up and running. We arrived overhead with 7,500 pounds of gas, about what we had expected but certainly not enough to go anywhere else.

Typhoon Samoi had slowed and moved south. Counterclockwise, swirling bands of severe thunderstorms had begun to fill in on its backside. Though the storm center was 150 miles to the north, the typhoon encompassed an area 600 miles across and 1,200 miles long.

Both airports in Guam have long, dual runways that run from northeast to southwest. The wind that came roaring in with those backfilling storms was almost straight out of the west, at times reaching 80 knots. Those treacherous winds kept us from shooting an ILS approach. A precision approach would have placed us well outside the tailwind limits for the aircraft.

We set up for the TACAN 24, non-precision approach to Anderson Air Force Base. We would



come in over the ocean, cross a cliff several hundred feet high and touch down on the runway atop the cliff, less than a half-mile from the edge. On a clear day, it can be an eye-opener. On a night like this, it can kill you. One windshear downdraft at the wrong time and not only will you not clear the cliff, you might never see it coming.

If you've ever had to pull your car to the side of the road during a heavy downpour, you can relate to the conditions that night. Now imagine yourself moving at 150 miles an hour and not being given the luxury of stopping. The rain was horizontal. We could not see three feet ahead, let alone the half-mile required to land at that speed. On the first approach, an 80-knot windshear took our speed from 150 to 230 knots in two seconds. A go-around was mandatory.

The second approach had a little less windshear. The radar showed nothing but red on the 30-mile scale. We normally don't even fly *through* red, let alone land in it. According to Approach Control, we had been over the end of the runway both times, but we never saw a thing. Fuel was now 5,000 pounds.

I was ready to start bending the rules because I had to get closer to the ground to have any chance to land. I opted for a downwind ILS, landing in the opposite direction. We began the approach with the autopilot locked on ILS, despite the out-of-limit winds. The GPS showed a 40-knot tailwind (the limit is 10), but I was out of ideas. At around 250 feet, we got the one that always gets you in the simulator: the minus 40-knot windshear. You instantly lose the airflow over the wings that keeps you airborne. The

aircraft can stall and fall and there is nothing you can do about it. Our airspeed went to around 100 knots. We would have died if it had reached 95. I clicked off the autopilot and shoved the throttles to the stops, trying to initiate a textbook windshear recovery. I actually saw runway lights at one point. But we couldn't land with that combination of airspeed, windshear and visibility. We would have crashed on the runway. We went around again.

I got clearance to Guam International, 20 miles away. The fuel was now 4,400. We declared minimum fuel. Approach asked for "souls on board," and we knew that was so they could tell the rescue teams how many bodies to look for. The controller said his radar showed the weather getting worse.

We were cleared for our fourth approach, a VOR/TACAN 24 to Guam International. So far, all the approaches had been backed up by the copilot, using home-made GPS approaches, and he was calling out centerline deviations. I had been flying real instruments, not computer-generated ones. Approach called the position of the actual terrain obstructions (to our left) and gave us unofficial help for centerline, although he did not actually have "precision radar" and could not "legally" do it. I recognized his calls for what they were and started cheating 50 to 100 feet on the minimum descent altitudes. We still couldn't see anything forward. We went around again.

The TACAN went out of service sometime during the go-around, so we were cleared for the NDB approach to runway 24, the only one left for us to use. The fuel gauge read 2,800 pounds. Going around is not recommended



below 1,500 pounds in the C-9 because the deck angle may cause the engines to flame out. We turned on all the fuel-tank pumps, even in the empty tanks, and opened the fuel cross-feed. We had been over the end of runway every time; we just hadn't been able to see it. We went around for the fifth time.

We had enough gas for one or two more tries. I tried to decide what to say in the voice recorder right before we crashed.

As we asked for early turn-in vectors to the NDB, the crew chief (whose birthday was that day) asked, "OK guys, what are we going to do now?" I decided to couple up the NDB approach on the GPS computer with the autopilot—an unauthorized, untested technique that allows the computer to fly the aircraft without outside reference. I flew to 100 feet below the approved minimums on autopilot-altitude hold. This allowed me to look outside without concentrating on the instruments. We drove in and caught our first break, a gap in the waves of thunderstorm cells rolling across the island. We saw the ground, and, for the first time, saw the runway at three-quarters of a mile.

I immediately clicked off the autopilot and dove to 100 feet to avoid any possibility of going back into the clouds. We were still in moderate rain. In close, I pushed it over. We picked up a 40-knot windshear 30 or 40 feet from the end of the runway. I continued to push the nose down, willing to have it hit if I had to, but I managed to level out at five feet and, incredibly, ended up with a smooth touchdown. The antiskid released several times as we hydroplaned on the rain-soaked runway. We stopped on

centerline with 3,000 feet remaining. We sat there for a minute. Then the torrential rain closed back in, and I could not see to taxi. The fuel was 2,000 pounds. Riotous applause erupted from the back. They had known we were in trouble, but the three of us in the front knew we had enough gas left for only one more pass.

Thirteen civilian airliners had received the same weather report as we did that night. They all started out expecting to land at Guam, and they all carried enough fuel to divert to Tokyo, Manila or Okinawa. In other words, they had an extra 30,000 pounds of gas. That's what we had started with. All 13 diverted to their alternates, some before an approach and some after. We were the only aircraft who made it in that night (or the next 24 hours).

Around midnight, as we pulled into the gate, our crew chief looked around the cockpit and said, flatly, "Well, it looks like I survived another birthday."

We parked with 1,700 pounds of fuel. The APU flamed out 45 minutes later. We actually had less than 500 pounds of usable fuel remaining on touchdown.

Will I ever fly around the Far East with the Navy again? Absolutely. Will I ever fly to an island destination that has a tropical depression nearby? Not on your life. Sometimes even your best isn't good enough.

Three days later, we made our way back to Atsugi. As we shut down and walked away from the aircraft, I turned around. Sitting all by himself, up on the tail, was a big, old black raven. I could swear he winked at me and whispered, "Nevermore." 🦇

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