

Turboprop in Afterburner



By Lt. Ray Leung

It was a cloudy day in the Papa areas off the coast of California. My E-2 crew just had finished a COMPTUEX combat search-and-rescue and battle-group air-defense (BGAD) mission. As the combat-information-center officer, I was in the back of the Hawkeye, and it had been a low-tasking mission.

After my passdown on J-Voice to the oncoming E-2, I reported mission-complete to the pilot and copilot. Our skipper, in the pilot seat, led us back to the overhead stack for a mid-afternoon Case I recovery. There were only two aircraft below us when we reached the stack. When we arrived at the initial, our pilot spotted two Hornets returning from their BGAD mission.

The next thing we heard on the radio was the air boss calling, “Six Zero Zero, depart and re-enter.” I was disappointed because that cut into my chow time. The pilots flew out to seven miles, climbed to 5,000 feet, and re-entered the overhead stack, awaiting instructions from the air boss. Like a bee buzzing over his beehive, we waited.

With more Hornets showing up, we began to hawk fuel states. Then 30 minutes later, the air boss charlied us with only 2,500 pounds of fuel in our tanks. We pushed and hit our numbers, three miles and 800 feet at the initial. When we were directly overhead the carrier, I felt a strong thud, followed by violent vibrations, throughout

the aircraft. My air control officer immediately shouted, “Our right engine is on fire!”

In the meantime, the LSO called over the tower frequency, “Six Zero Zero, your right engine is spitting out flames!” I snapped toward that general direction and saw an engine fire—something no one ever wants to see in the back of an E-2. Our starboard engine looked like a Roman candle. It was as though the turbo-prop had kicked into fifth-stage afterburner, except the flame was bright orange instead of Bunsen-burner blue.

My skipper completed the boldface NATOPS items, pulled the starboard T-handle, and pushed the fire bottle, extinguishing the fire. The propeller feathered without a hitch.

Many questions went through my mind. What if the left engine also decides to quit? What if we miss the wires? Am I ready to go swimming in the Pacific Ocean? While many thoughts flew through my already saturated brain, we were downwind and ready to come aboard. We descended to 600 feet at the 180, on speed, and then to 450 feet at the 90, on speed. After a few more sugar calls from our copilot, we landed with an OK underline.

With the hook up and wings still folding, our wounded Hawkeye taxied clear of the landing area and parked behind the island. After a high-speed shutdown and inspection, maintenance found the engine FODed itself because of a compressor-blade failure. 🛩️

Lt. Leung flies with VAW-117.