



Photo by Matthew J. Thomas

Early

By Lt. Kyle Meer

With 187 days down and two days left on our SAR detachment on board USS *Wasp*, we got tasked one last time. The mission was to ferry the admiral between ARG boats off the coast of North Carolina for a little grip and grin and, then, return him home to Norfolk. The pilot was a new HAC on his first logistics mission, and I was the copilot. I was a senior HAC on the cruise and looked forward to a stress-free, fun flight.

The flight was shaping up to be a logistical circus, but nothing a couple of seasoned H-46 bubbas couldn't handle. The weather was iffy, and the flight planning included several detours for fuel. No one was excited about flying home early, just to turn around and fly back to the boat for two more days.

The first leg from the LHD to the LSD was uneventful, but, because of heavy rains and reduced visibility, the HAC decided to remain on the deck while we waited for the admiral to conduct his business. Once he was back on board, we called for breakdown, cleaned up the aircraft for takeoff, and pulled into a hover. As I pulled power, one of the admiral's staff noticed smoke briefly had spit from

Homecoming

the No. 1 engine exhaust and mentioned it to our crew chief, an AD2. The crew chief investigated and said it must've been steam burning off from pooled-up rainwater. We continued the 20 miles to Moorehead City, N.C., where we dropped off the admiral and were told to return in an hour after refueling at Cherry Point.

The flight to and from Cherry Point had us weaving in and out of low clouds and picking up an SVFR clearance. It made for exciting flying, but, by the time we got back to Moorehead City, the skies were blue, and the sun was shining. We picked up the admiral and his staff and headed north to Norfolk. Again, on takeoff, the staff member saw smoke, and, a few minutes later, the crew chief and I noticed a burning smell for a split second. Neither one of us spoke up, dismissing it as a whiff of exhaust almost as soon as it went away.

We continued to Norfolk, while the crew relaxed and enjoyed the flight. Everything seemed to be going according to plan. The only hang-up was the navigation chart got sucked out the window somewhere over North Carolina; fortunately, we were in a familiar area. Roughly two hours later, we dropped off the admiral at the designated LZ and picked up the local-course rules for entry into NAS Oceana. The plan was to get gas at Oceana, then fly the beachline back to N.C. and the ship. After refueling, we stopped by base ops to pick up a new chart and the requested Special V for departure.

About 15 miles south of Oceana, ATC called and asked if we could assist them with a search for an H-53 that had a precautionary emergency landing to the north. Always willing to help out, we acknowledged the call and turned around. We were used to being flexible and began replanning our fuel and timetable en route to the datum. Once on scene, we set up a search pattern and quickly found the H-53 resting comfortably on the fairway of the 11th hole of a local golf course. We radioed the location to ATC, as we turned back to Oceana for more fuel.

At that moment, we glanced at the gauges for a quick ops-normal and found things weren't normal. The No. 1 engine's oil pressure was fluctuating plus-or-minus-20 psi. Since plus-or-minus-three psi is the acceptable limit, we were concerned and investigated.

After double-checking the remaining gauges up front and conducting a leak check in back, we concluded it must be an electrical problem. How does engine-oil pressure get so far out of whack without evidence of a leak or any secondaries? The HAC and I agreed our safest bet would be to get the bird checked out at our nearby home squadron before making the 120-mile flight back to the ship.

The fluctuations didn't seem to get worse, but, when we descended into the heliport, I saw the fluctuations corresponded to power inputs. When the maintainers hooked up a direct-reading gauge, we knew we were done. Sure enough, on shutdown, the No. 1 oil tank nearly was empty.

During the course of our five-hour flight, oil had been seeping slowly into the exhaust duct and burning

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off. If we had decided to push back to the boat, we would have found ourselves in a much worse situation: single engine, in bad weather, in the middle of nowhere. I remember once discussing the theory of engine-oil emergencies and disagreeing that pressure fluctuations indicate immediate, impending failure. Looking back, we realized how fortunate we had been.

The lesson of the day was that a new experience always can teach you something. Just because you've never seen it before or think you know the problem, it's never a bad idea to land and check it out. Instead of learning the hard way, we landed and got to see our families two days earlier than expected. 

Lt. Meer flies with HC-8.