

SANDSTORM

IN SAUDI ARABIA

By Lt. Paul Riehle

Things were becoming routine three weeks into our deployment to Prince Sultan Airbase, Saudi Arabia. A sprawling complex located in the heart of the Persian Gulf sandbox, the base is not a hospitable home in the middle of July. Severe temperatures, no rain, and fierce winds combine for a nasty environment that can drop visibility to nearly zero. Sandstorms in that area

of the world, as we soon would learn, are sudden and unpredictable. Within minutes, desert winds of moderate strength can whip up enough sand to shut down operations. For our carrier-based squadron, sandstorms were something we had talked about but had not yet experienced.

The flight was to be a fun, short hop, by Operation Southern Watch standards. We



Photograph by Senior Airman Deltah Castillo

were to take a section of Prowlers 50 miles north of the airbase and conduct jamming runs against the base's Patriot missile-defense batteries. There was an air of friendly competition between the Prowler and Patriot crews to see whose systems and operators were the best.

Forecasted weather was what we had grown accustomed to during our stay in the Persian Gulf: severe clear, light winds, and miserably hot temperatures. Nobody seemed concerned when, by walk time, winds had stiffened to a consistent 10 knots.

The flight went as planned, with both jets taking off in section and remaining in close formation. The mood was light as both the Patriot and Prowler crews did their best in a great electromagnetic duel. After 45 minutes, both Prowler crews had had enough and headed for home. The ATIS weather brief was the same as we had received on deck, except this time it added a benign sounding trailer: sandstorms in the vicinity.

Approach gave us our next indication: This was not going to be a normal landing. Knowing we were near the field, they urged us to return as expediently as possible, since a strong sandstorm was approaching. At 20 miles, we saw the reason for approach's concern. The storm already had hit the eastern edge of the base and quickly was moving west, right toward the runway. Opting to race the storm to the runway, rather than divert or hold overhead until it passed, we quickly coordinated with tower for a short initial and thundered in at 1,200 feet for the break. In the three minutes it had taken us to get to the short initial, the sandstorm had obscured most of the base and was bearing down on the runway.

Approaching the numbers, we soon realized the standard left-hand-break would take us into the rapidly approaching sandstorm. The wall of sand and dust rose off the desert floor up to 2,000 feet. Thinking quickly, ECMO 1 in the lead Prowler asked tower for a right-

hand break and signaled the wingman to cross under. Tower's response added the next complication to the flight. In its march toward the field, the storm completely enveloped the tower. Unable to get tower clearance for the non-standard break and still racing the storm, the lead jet cleared the flight for the break, away from the storm.

Both Prowlers had rabid spider monkeys at the controls. They both flew customary approaches, cleared themselves for landing, and touched down just ahead of the storm. The speed and intensity of the sandstorm was evident as we entered it at midfield during our rollout. Swallowed up in the wall of sand, visibility dropped to 50 feet and both aircrews lost sight of each other. After coordinating over the radios, each pilot turned off on separate exits and then parked to wait out the storm. Fifteen minutes after landing, visibility improved to the point where both jets safely could taxi to their lines. Several lessons were learned.

Respect Mother Nature. The speed and severity of the sandstorm took us by surprise. Complacency about the hot summer weather almost turned a fun hop into something ugly.

Make the divert decision early. Diverting may have been the right thing to do. In an attempt to get on deck at our home station, we made a poor decision and pressed the weather. No one in the jet could have predicted how fast the sandstorm would overtake the field.

Good crew coordination and section integrity can make up for bad decision-making.

Lt. Riehle flies with VAQ-136.

Several of our staff suggested that an additional communication option may have been to talk to the squadron representative in the tower.—Ed.

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