



The Plan

By Lt. Patrick Beam

It was a good deal any JO would jump at: a chance to get off the boat after only five days of a 15-day FRS and air wing CQ detachment. We were to fly two HH-60Hs cross-country from Jacksonville to San Diego. Since there were other commitments for the CQ detachment, an H2P and I would be joined by two HACs from another squadron. After leaving the boat, we spent a week at the squadron, while a ground crew flew to Jacksonville to prepare the aircraft for transfer. When the transfer was complete, we flew to Jacksonville to pick up the aircraft for the cross-country to San Diego.

Although we were late taking off, we finished our first and only leg of the first day—IFR from Jacksonville to NAS Pensacola—with no problems. The plan for the next day was to launch around 0800 and to stop in west Texas for the night. We briefed the next morning, and, while the plane captains completed their turn-around (TA) inspections, we checked weather and laid out our flight plan for the day.

The first stop would be Acadiana, La. We filed IFR flight plans since the weather wasn't good enough for VFR.

When we arrived at the flight line, the plane captain for my aircraft told us he was concerned with maintenance discrepancies found during his TA. The HAC wanted to discuss these discrepancies with the Jacksonville squadron who had turned the aircraft over to us. After talking to them, the HAC still wanted to talk to one of our squadron reps in San Diego. We knew our squadron wanted to keep both aircraft together, so the other crew waited until our aircraft was ready to go. Several hours later and after numerous phone calls, countless ground turns, and a 30-minute flight to test the system, everything checked good. We finally were ready to get on the road.

It was now 1400, and the two HACs went to base ops to file flight plans for the third time, while the other H2P and I readied the aircraft for departure. The field now was VFR, but since we had filed IFR the two previous times, I assumed the plan would stay the same. We were at the taxi checklist when I heard the other aircraft call for taxi, "Six one five and flight, taxi, VFR."

This was the first time the other H2P and I were aware we would be flying VFR and in formation. We

had briefed formation for the day before but not for this flight. I had not looked at a VFR sectional for the leg we were going to fly. I asked my HAC what the plan was, and he told me we would follow the same airways filed previously but fly VFR. We took off as Dash 2 under radar control. Once clear of the tree line around the field, we immediately saw the weather to the west was worse than at the field.

When we left Pensacola airspace, we were cleared VFR to the west and advised of a 300-foot tower along our flight path. Because of our low altitude, we were below their radar coverage. The ceilings were 500 feet, and visibility was about two miles. As we continued on course, the ceilings dropped to 300 feet with 1.5 miles visibility. We had a good GPS fix, but I didn't know lead's plan to get through the Mobile Class C airspace, which we would be approaching in 25 minutes.

I became very concerned. Our present heading would take us close to large radio towers in eastern Alabama. I told my HAC I was not comfortable with the situation. He agreed the weather was getting bad, and he began coordinating with lead to devise a new plan. We decided to change our current course, turned south, and stayed along the coast. We would follow Mobile Bay to the north, and, when within range, we would try to contact Mobile approach. It sounded like a good plan, so we worked our way down to the coastline. We weaved through water towers and beach-line construction cranes, searching for a spot to cut north to Mobile Bay.

Because we had flown commercial to Jacksonville, our flight gear had two big problems. The flotation gear and HEEDS had been removed from our vests. Additionally, the plane captains in both aircraft lacked flotation gear. As we proceeded toward Mobile over the bay, the ceilings dropped even lower, leaving no way to proceed unless we were picked up IFR. Both aircraft orbited over the water while we figured out what to do. Visibility was so low no visual-outside reference existed to aid in determining our position. I felt uneasy about being over water for an extended period with no flotation.

We weaved through water towers and beach-line construction cranes, searching for a spot to cut north to Mobile Bay.

Lead tried to get comms with Mobile approach, while we tried to get through to the local FSS to change our flight plan. We could not contact anyone while at 200 feet in a holding pattern over Mobile Bay. Once again, we had to come up with a new plan. One aircraft was without a useable aux-fuel tank, so fuel became a consideration now that we had added about an hour to our flight time. Our first option was to return to the coastline and follow it to the west, until we reached a good place to cut north to our destination. Our second option was to return to NAS Pensacola. With sunset about an hour away, we decided to head back to Pensacola. Better to turn and run and live to fight another day. So it was back to the coastline, and we turned toward Pensacola.

Nearing Pensacola airspace, we were not able to get comms with approach because of our low altitude. We hugged the airspace, searching for a hole to climb through to get in contact with approach. Twenty-five minutes later, we successfully picked up separate squawks and shot PARs into NAS Pensacola. We broke out at a comfortable 400 feet after vectors had taken us seven miles out over the water. We shut down on the transient line next to two SH-60Fs, who just had flown in VFR from the west. They were glad to hear we had decided to fly back to Pensacola because they had been at 200 feet, in one-half-mile visibility, hugging the coastline on their way from Louisiana to Pensacola.

Despite one of the most constructive debriefs in my aviation career, I could have done without this flight. There was a lack of crew coordination between the two crews. Fifteen minutes would have been enough to discuss the route to Acadiana and to familiarize ourselves with what we would need to make it VFR.

Another weak point was my lack of assertiveness when I heard the call for taxi VFR. I was not ready to navigate VFR, even if I was only Dash 2. As wing, we often feel we are just along for the ride; in actuality, it is our responsibility to back up lead in navigation. When we saw bad weather, we easily could have asked Pensacola approach for a climb to stay in radar contact, then file a flight plan to continue IFR. Heading for the coastline was a good idea at the time, but spending as much time over the water as we did without flotation was not a comfortable feeling, nor was having plane captains without any water-survival gear. 🛩️

Lt. Beam flies with HS-8.