

By LCdr. Ken O'Donnell

I was an experienced TA-4J SERGRAD (with a whopping 400 flight hours) and a lieutenant junior grade, to boot. I believed I could fly the mighty Skyhawk to any limit, maximum or minimum; the books told me I could.

One of the no-brainer minimums is the 200-foot-minimum ceiling for a precision approach. I never could figure out why the instructors, who already had done a fleet tour, would complain about flying when the ceilings got below TACAN mins. Didn't they know flight time was the most important thing in the world? I figured they were wimps, who had been spoiled with things like multiple radios, INS and radar. The TA-4J had been flying safely for years with a single radio (hey, it monitored guard), TACAN, VOR, and no radar. Surely, any winged naval aviator could fly down to PAR minimums—a good pilot probably could go lower.

On one, nasty, Mississippi day, with all of the MOAs clobbered, the only chance of getting Xs for the day was to send air-nav flights out-and-in. It still was cool to me that you could fly hundreds of miles away, have dinner, and be back home a few hours later to crack open a cold one. Besides, if your jet broke while there, the old \$38-a-day per diem would kick in. That much money was a lot to a lieutenant junior grade 15 years ago—it seems like a lot yet today when we earn PMR in Fallon. So, off I flew with my instrument student, along with a fleet-experienced Marine instructor in another jet, out-and-in to Cecil Field.

The weather was much improved in Cecil. We shot our multiple approaches, landed, grabbed some sliders, and briefed for our air nav back to Meridian. My student was on his last two radio-instrument (RI) flights. Upon successful completion of a TACAN and two PARs



# When Is Bingo, Bingo?

back at Meridian, he would be RI complete and eligible to move on to the airway-navigation (AN) phase. The weather brief for our return flight forecasted 400-foot ceilings, twice the PAR minimums—“should be a piece of cake,” I thought. We selected Columbus AFB, only 60 miles away, as our alternate, with a forecast of 1,500-foot ceilings. As we launched on satisfied stomachs, my confidence and pride were intact.

We commenced our TACAN approach shortly before 2200 and comfortably broke out at mins, meaning the PAR would be no problem. We went around the GCA box and broke out at 300 feet on the first PAR, then headed for a last PAR. Meanwhile, our second jet was just behind us on their approaches. As we turned downwind for our last approach, the other instructor, who had fleet experience, called me on approach frequency and said he had broken out at 200 feet and chose to full stop.

He recommended I full stop on my next approach. He sounded concerned, which bothered me a bit, and the thought I should fly the next approach came to mind. If I flew it, though, the student would be one approach away from completion, and it would require another flight before he could start his next-phase simulators. I decided to let him fly it to 400 feet. I then would take over, put it on deck, and hit the club for that cold one.

I don't know if the student was getting the leans or what, but he started going farther and farther left. A couple of pimps from me weren't helping him correct. Finally, at 500 feet, when the controller stated, “Going too far left for a safe approach,” I took the controls.

I made an aggressive correction and got it back to on-and-on at 200 feet—and still IFR. As I started adding power, the rabbit lights broke out underneath me. With about a 15-degree cut from runway heading, I wouldn't be very comfortable with 150 feet of altitude to make a major play for the runway. Taking the waveoff, I would come around for a rails PAR and set up in a better position to land. Come on, I had 1,800 pounds of fuel left—enough for at least two more passes, probably three.

As I turned downwind, approach said, “Your duty officer wants to know what your fuel state is.” “1,600 pounds,” I replied.

“Still above bingo to Columbus,” I thought. About a minute later, approach told me that my duty officer was directing me to divert to Columbus. I felt perturbed someone else was making decisions for me, but the idea of a 1,500-foot ceiling sounded good. I started a bingo profile with 200 pounds over bingo-fuel state, declared minimum-fuel state with center, and headed toward Columbus.

The squadron SDO, another fleet-experienced Marine, called ahead to Columbus to let them know I was on my way. Shortly afterward, I received a call from Meridian tower, on guard, asking me to contact them. I let center know I was going to switch off frequency for a minute; I then switched tower to find out what was up.

Meridian tower said Columbus had dropped below minimums and was closed. I was directed to divert to NAS Memphis, now Millington municipal, over 200 miles away from my present position. I immediately switched back to center, declared an emergency, climbed to 37,000 feet, and asked my student to look up bingo fuel. We were about 500 pounds below bingo.

If you've ever flown a bingo profile for real, you know the worst part is wanting to get on deck as soon as possible but having to fly incredibly slow. Over the next hour, we had time to talk about every possible scenario, including a detailed discussion of ejecting if the engine flamed out. Note that I still was IFR, from 200 feet to 37,000 feet, and we had been solid IFR. We began our idle descent with 600 pounds of fuel remaining, eventually breaking out at about 3,000 feet and instantly realizing it was pouring rain. Those who have flown the mighty Skyhawk, with its narrow stance, know heavy rain means standing water, which means taking an arrested landing.

Memphis approach asked if I would rather land at Memphis International, which was about 10 miles closer. I asked if there was standing water. Yes. Arresting gear? No. Because I was familiar with NAS Memphis, I chose the arrested landing there.

We were switched to the GCA controller, who told us at 10 miles they were having problems with the runway lights: Only the first and last 1,000 feet were lit. Considering the mental state I was in, this problem didn't make sense to me

until I saw the runway lights at about three miles. For 1,000 feet, you had runway-edge lights. Then you had 6,000 feet of blackness, followed by another 1,000 feet of edge lights but no centerline lights. The arresting gear was at 1,750 feet. Because none of the lights were working in that area, including the yellow A-Gear lights, trucks were parked on each side, with their headlights shining on the gear.

I thought a little rain removal might help me see—nope. All it did was blur the windscreen even more. I gave up on flying the ball and aimed for the center of the edge lights. As quickly as I landed, I rolled into blackness. Fortunately, I saw the centerline with my taxi light and just waited for the tug of the arresting gear. I never saw the trucks or their headlights—probably because I was too focused on centerline.

When we had stopped, I sat there for a few moments, enjoying the relief. The GCA controller asked how much fuel I had trapped with, and I reported the gauge showed 300 pounds. As I tried to remember what the fuel-gauge error was at 300 pounds, they asked me another question, “Sir, for controller training, if you had waved off, how many more passes could you have made before flaming out?”

Funny how your mind works at times like that. I instantly recalled a story of an F-4 pilot at the boat, who went around numerous times one night. Finally, he was told if he did not trap on his next pass, he was to steer clear of the carrier and eject. Shortly after trapping on that next pass, the boss yelled, “Lights on deck!” To which the quick-witted pilot responded, “Boss, I don’t bother you when you’re taking a s\*\*\*!”

I don’t know if that story is true, or if it’s an urban legend, but, man, I wanted to give the same response. Instead, I told him, “Once, if I was lucky.”

The crazy thing is that the story isn’t quite over. After parking and shutting down, we walked into base ops, where all the controllers were waiting to meet us. They told me the field was supposed to have closed about a half-hour earlier. But, thanks to my duty officer—there’s that experience thing again—they had been given a heads up and had stayed late to catch me. After I thanked them, they told me the rain was so heavy they could not see any

of my lights from the tower, and the first visual they had on me was the sparks from my tailhook dragging down the runway.

Last, they told me about the runway-light problems. They had tried everything but shutting them down and recycling the on switch. They decided to wait to recycle the switch until I had landed and taxied in. None of the runway lights came back on.

By now I was dying for that cold one I had thought about earlier. “A quick call to the SDO and we will go find one,” I thought.

The SDO said, “Good job, O.D. Now, get the jet back as soon as you get your minimum crew rest; we need the jet for tomorrow’s flight schedule.” So much for the cold one.

I now sit here with over 3,000 hours and haven’t had to bingo since. I also haven’t heard of too many other pilots who ever have flown a no-kidding bingo profile, at or below bingo fuel. I have seen situations where pilots put themselves into a box, where the only choice was but to land where they currently were.

I talked to one single-seat pilot who landed his fighter with 900 pounds of fuel remaining during a fly-in from the CV to a Far East NAF. I asked what his plan would have been if the nearby divert field hadn’t reopened. He replied, “I don’t know. I guess I would have headed out over water and ejected.” He was serious. He didn’t consider pressing to the next divert over 200 miles away. I don’t know if I ever would have made such a decision on that stormy Mississippi night.

What’s the moral of this story? Keep your options in mind when things aren’t as you expected. If you are the one standing the duty, remember you have a lot more information available, along with phones and usually other aircrew around you, to help the boxed-in aviator make the best decision. If it hadn’t been for that experienced SDO watching out for this inexperienced instructor, I probably would be writing about my first parachute ride.

By the way, I’m now one of those wimps, with a special-instrument rating, who bring up excuses like ORM when there is no operational necessity. Minimums are one edge of the envelope that doesn’t have to be pushed to be one of the best. 

LCdr. O’Donnell currently flies with VAQ-139.