

Clean Up, Join Up, and Shut Up



By LCdr. Halsey Keats

Fallon, Nevada—not exactly paradise but, nonetheless, a work-up location greatly anticipated by carrier aviators. Fallon offers advanced air-wing training, snowboarding and gambling on the weekends, and, most importantly, some of the best and least restrictive VFR flying the nation has to offer.

It was the last day of work-ups for our Viking squadron, and many of us were eager to hit the

road back to San Diego. I was part of a good-deal, three-plane, low-level bombing hop. The weather-guessers had forecasted possible late-afternoon dust storms and light snow showers. Around brief

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Lead broke up the flight at point alpha, and we proceeded along the route as singles. Our first indication of bad weather conditions came halfway through the route, when lead reported dust storms and recommended we climb. The altitude change was warranted as we soon found ourselves in near-IFR conditions.

My COTAC and I worried that our off-route rendezvous point still might be IFR. The join-up, however, turned out to be uneventful.

The plan was to proceed to W-16 for bombing practice. All we could see was dust. A quick check with the range personnel confirmed the bombing range was enveloped in a dust storm. Lead aborted the bombing portion of the flight, and the division headed back to Fallon.

With field visibility at one mile in blowing dust, the planned fan break also was cancelled. Lead broke up the flight by detaching Dash-3 and instructing them to maintain visual separation until another squawk was received.

Simultaneously, because of the poor weather on the range, the advance phase strike of 20 aircraft checked in early with the controller. Approach did not understand that Dash-3 already had detached and was “hanging out” VFR near our section. After a long exchange with approach, Dash-3 was given a squawk and vectored away from the rest of the flight.

Lead then worked with approach to break up the section into singles. Lead got a separate squawk for our jet. We made a right turn, 90 degrees off present heading, for separation. We were instructed to descend to 1,000 feet below lead. During my turn, I also saw Dash-1 turn and descend.

Right away, I was IMC with our former lead somewhere off my left wing. I told Dash-1, on squadron-tactical frequency, the turn and descent was for our jet only. At the same time, approach recognized the error and instructed Dash-1 to return to his previous course. With

lead clear, I was switched to a discrete frequency for the PAR.

Fifteen minutes had elapsed since we started the division break up. During this time, the strikers had reached the approach corridor, and I was vectored several times across the final approach course for separation from the low-state aircraft.

My first attempt to land was unsuccessful because our interval failed to report “clear of the duty” in time. Field visibility was poor enough tower no longer could see aircraft exiting the runway. This visibility oversight would cost me another 20 minutes airborne in rapidly deteriorating conditions. I was vectored downwind and instructed to climb to 7,000 feet. During the climb, I reentered IMC conditions. At 15 miles north of the field, I was given a turn to base leg.

As I neared the final approach course, my COTAC began pinging approach control for a turn; approach did not reply. Several more attempts also failed. My COTAC alerted me that, because of the extended downwind, our base leg was taking us perilously close to nearby mountains. I climbed 500 feet in IMC to clear the mountains, while my COTAC cycled through several frequencies.

Finally, my COTAC found approach on an alternate frequency. Approach quickly gave me a 180-degree turn back toward final. The controller was overloaded with numerous low-state Hornets who had been waved off because of weather. I then participated in a controller vector-ex, while zigzagging back and forth across final. My COTAC began to plan a bingo back to North Island. If you gotta go, you might as well go home.

After an eternity, I was switched to a final controller, and we turned into the heart of the dust storm. Visibility was reported at less than one-sixteenth mile; being dual piloted, we continued. Several times, approach lost and then regained the PAR radar—another bonus of blowing dust. We were cleared to land on the left.

The blowing dust was accompanied by gusting winds. At one mile, my AOA pegged. I immediately placed the throttles at mil power and stuffed the nose. Before I could communicate

what was going on, the jet recovered and was back to a nearly on-speed state. I selected take-off flaps to get a better engine response and increased waveoff capability.

At decision height, I picked up the runway, and the controller cleared us to proceed visually. As the runway became clearer, we saw another runway to the left and adjusted.

At 100 feet, the controller called, “Dragon 704, you appear to be lined up for the right runway.”

A glance to the left revealed yet another runway. I made a full-stick deflection and finally lined up on the left. The roll out and taxi back was uneventful.

The debrief provided numerous lessons learned that could have made the flight less memorable for me and easier for the low-state Hornets. First, either lead or the controller should break up a flight—do not mix and match. Lead should have detached Dash-2 and -3, providing altitude separation at the rendezvous point. Each aircraft would have contacted approach on their own to get a squawk and

coordinated their own arrival. Lead also could have allowed approach to break up the entire flight by assigning squawks and giving vectors for separation.

While we were on a bombing mission, two aircraft in my flight had refueling stores. We landed with plenty of gas, while our air-wing brethren approached bingo. Approach was overwhelmed with simultaneous handling of numerous low-state aircraft. In retrospect, we should have set up a tanker stack north of Fallon. Working with the strike lead, we could have split up the strike package, keeping half attached to us, while the remainder landed.

We should have gone around one more time. The AOA excursion and the lineup on the wrong runway forced me to make large in-close corrections with gusty winds—a recipe for a stall. We had plenty of gas to go around numerous times before we needed to bingo.

In case you were wondering, the first runway I lined up on was the CALA (combat-aircraft-landing area). 🦅

LCdr. Keats flies with VS-29.

Lead aborted the bombing portion of the flight, and the division headed back to Fallon.



Photo by Cdr. Chris Buhlmann. Modified.