Just a Routine Ferry Flight?

By Maj Frank W. Stepongzi, USAFR, Barksdale AFB, La.

It was a routine ferry flight mission. We were scheduled to fly our B-52 up to a closing base, load up with Advanced Cruise Missiles (ACMs), and fly home.

For this mission, I was the copilot, flight engineer, and the mission commander. While I had never actually flown with ACMs and had only performed one other heavyweight landing in a B-52, I was one of the more experienced instructor pilots in the squadron. Also, I had been previously assigned to our destination base.

The plan was simple: take off and fly home. Fortunately, the aircraft commander and I had planned ahead for all possible contingencies on the return leg. In case of bad weather, we had a reliability tanker nearby and a preplanned divert base that could handle our missiles.

There were no incidents on the flight up to the base. We then had a couple of days off to enjoy the sites in the area. The return mission went as planned until we were back on the ground at our home base. We flew an instrument landing system approach and touched down within the first 1,500 feet of the landing zone.

I deployed the drag chute and felt the familiar tug on my shoulder harness as the drag chute inflated. It was a little weaker than normal, but I attributed that to the heavier than normal landing weight. Then came the call from tower, "Doom 92, you have a streamer!"

I immediately advised the aircraft commander to shut down the outboard engines to help reduce our landing ground run and started checking the distance remaining markers. From our mission planning, we had anticipated a landing ground run of 5,900 feet without the drag chute. As I saw the 5,000-foot remaining marker go by us, I rechecked the airspeed, 107 Knots Indicated Air Speed (KIAS). I applied the brakes, knowing that our airspeed and aircraft weight had put us in the hot brakes caution zone we had calculated during mission planning. We were only 3 KIAS above the normal zone. I declared an emergency with tower and advised them of our situation.

Still applying brakes as we turned off the runway, I advised the crew to pin their ejection seats and plan to abandon the aircraft as soon as we stopped in the rollout hammerhead. The crew acknowledged my call and did exactly as ordered after we came to a stop.

The aircraft commander and I were the last two off the aircraft since we had to shut down the engines and close the fuel valves. I wasn't in a big hurry to get off the aircraft because the charts showed that we were just barely in the caution zone for the brake energy. We were evacuating as a precautionary measure ... simply following procedures.

As I made my way down the crew entry hatch, I could feel the heat on my back from the forward landing gear brakes. I had never before felt heat like that from brakes. I didn't take the time to look back. I immediately ran away from the aircraft to where the rest of the crew had formed up. We could see the brakes glowing from the safety of the supervisor of the flying truck. It took almost an hour for the brakes to cool off before the fire department would release the aircraft back to us.

It was determined later that the parachute failure had occurred because the drag chute had not been installed in accordance with local technical orders. The brakes were inspected for heat damage and replaced. Fortunately, we had planned ahead with brake energy computations and landing data prior to flight. Had we taxied the aircraft to parking, the brakes would have heated up more and could have erupted into flames, causing extensive damage to aircraft, facilities, and possibly personnel. Bottom line: Any time you are doing something different or unusual, get into the books and have a plan for those things that might go wrong. Fly Safe!

Photo by SrA Christina M. Rumsey