



NO ROOM FOR ERROR

F-16 glides into Baghdad

By Capt Mike Matesick, Hill AFB, Utah

Throughout my flying career I've been pretty fortunate when it comes to In-Flight Emergencies (IFE). I managed to make it through pilot training and two operational assignments in the Hog with no major issues. In fact, I seldom worried about emergencies because Hog drivers know the jet

is built with redundant systems, and best of all, two engines. If one gives you a problem, just push up the power on the other and go home. All that changed when I started flying the F-16 in 2000. One learns to have more respect for section 3 of the Dash-1 when there is only one engine. I spent 3 years making crude com-

ments about Viper drivers flying Operation NORTHERN WATCH (ONW) and Operation SOUTHERN WATCH (OSW) missions and losing an engine over Iraqi territory. It seems God has a sense of humor because I became the guy that lost an engine over Baghdad.

I was flying Operation IRAQI FREEDOM sorties from Al Udeid

AB, Qatar, and had logged several night missions in the AOR before my eventful evening. My wingman and I had just come off the tanker and called on station in our assigned Close Air Support (CAS) orbit. After 20 minutes of looking for something to do, we set up for some simulated attacks at 24,000 feet MSL when

my engine dumped. I heard a loud "bang" that blew my feet off the rudder pedals and I noticed a bright flash of light in my Night Vision Goggles (NVGs). Immediately, the jet began to shake to the point I could not read the HUD, so I snapped the throttle to idle. I told #2 I had a problem and he

responded he could see sparks coming from the exhaust nozzle. I pointed the nose east toward Baghdad and established a glide at 250 KIAS.

A glance at my engine instruments revealed the engine to be operating within normal limits except for the vibration, which decreased somewhat at idle. I



Photo by MSgt David R. Wheeler

I got out my Dash-1 checklist and began to search ...

did a belly check to determine if I was over a populated area before I jettisoned my bombs and wing tanks. I informed the command and control center of my problem, double checked my initial vector with them, and pushed the flight to Baghdad approach. After rechecking the engine instruments, I tried to push the throttle up to obtain something more than idle thrust; the vibrations became severe again, so I returned the throttle to idle.

At this point we were approximately 25-30 nm from Baghdad. Holding 250 KIAS would not allow me to establish a 1:1 glide ratio necessary to fly a flame-out (FO) approach, so I reduced the dive angle to

establish 230 KIAS. I got out my Dash-1 checklist and began to search for the appropriate page but soon realized there was nothing relating to "engine vibrations," so I settled on "abnormal engine response." I declared an emergency with Baghdad approach and inquired about the field status, winds, etc. as I set up for an FO to Runway 33. At approximately 12-15 nm from the field I established a 1:1 glide ratio and dropped the nose to capture my computed FO airspeed (confirmed by #2 earlier) while checking 30 degrees south to put myself on a base position.

soon realized there was nothing relating to "engine vibrations,"

About this time, approach informed me the main runway was closed because the lights weren't operational, and the only landing surface with lights was Taxiway Mike. I still had my NVGs on but was unable to find the runway (which was 6,000' feet east of Taxiway Mike) without any lights. My night seemed to be getting more interesting by the minute. I asked about the length of Taxiway Mike and since that was the only landing surface I could see, I decided that the taxiway would work just fine. I queried

approach to make sure the taxiway was clear and confirmed the absence of arresting cables. Now on final, I lowered the gear and tried one last time to push the power up in case I needed to go around. The vibrations were considerably worse than before; I would only get one chance to put the jet on the ground.

On final, inside a half mile, I raised my NVGs and dropped the nose, aiming short of Taxiway Mike to bleed off excess energy gained during the approach. I touched down 200-500 feet from the approach end and maintained a 2-point attitude while applying the brakes. The

nose smoothly fell to the ground and the jet stopped easily with 1,000-2,000 feet remaining. The engine vibrations were becoming unbearable, so I shut down on the taxiway and told #2 to go home. Fire department and transient alert trucks soon arrived to tow the jet off the active taxiway and ended my excitement for the evening. The engine was removed and sent to depot where an inspection revealed that the #4 bearing had failed.

My biggest lesson learned was that things happen quickly at night over hostile territory. I didn't have time to stop and think about the

basics of flying a jet with no useable thrust, I had to rely on training and experience. Had it not been for the training flying simulated FO approaches at home and for the valuable experience gained from instructors in the simulator, the night would have concluded differently. Mutual support is important for success during IFEs; just a few comments from my wingman confirming airspeeds and the airfield location were key in building my situational awareness. Finally, God does have a sense of humor; without the 30 knot tailwind on the way to Baghdad that night, I would have been walking to the airfield. ▶



Photo by SSgt Bennie J. Davis III