



# What Do You Mean... *the Gear's Not Attached?*

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**W**e were about 3 weeks into a 6-week deployment supporting Operation N O R T H E R N WATCH at Incirlik Air Base, Turkey. Our deployed tanker squadron of six KC-135 aircraft and seven crews had easily melded into a smoothly operating unit supporting the daily air tasking orders. I was the detachment commander and was monitoring flying operations the day it happened.

It was afternoon and our folks were returning from their missions when one of our crews reported gear problems following a touch-

and-go landing. One of the main gears had detached in some fashion. Well, that's a fairly serious issue for a tanker. I counted my blessings that we had a good mix of experience among our group and some excellent Instructor Pilots (IPs) available on the ground.

After a few radio calls and a low approach by the crew, we determined that this was indeed something we needed help to resolve. For some reason, the main aircraft strut had separated, but was still attached to the main truck, hanging by the two side braces only. In this configuration, the aircraft would likely experience extensive

damage if not a ground breakup during landing — that is if the gear truck didn't fall off first.

Although our operations had an In-Flight Emergency (IFE) checklist and procedures to follow, this particular situation didn't lend itself to a normal IFE recovery. We had to get some technical help, so we phone-patched through to the command post of another tanker unit, the 100th Air Refueling Wing located at Mildenhall Air Base, United Kingdom. We asked them to bring Boeing Aircraft engineering technical support on-line along with our home station command post. I had worked with Mildenhall dur-

ing the previous 3 weeks and because of their exceptional leadership in supporting our maintenance issues, I felt confident they would provide the best IFE support. I asked one of my two experienced IPs to man the tower and the other to help me communicate and provide decision options to the crew. During the next 45 minutes to an hour, we covered all possibilities and gave the crew details about what

to expect when the gear collapsed.

One of the decisions we made early on was where to land. We needed a soft surface like a dry lake-bed to minimize damage to the airframe and engines during touch down and stopping. But we did not have the options we would have had if we had been in the continental U.S. There was only one viable alternate airfield with a slightly longer runway about 2 hours away. While the crew initially wanted to bolt to that alternate, we managed to convince them that staying at Incirlik was a safer bet. Some of the factors that went into that call included our known U.S. Air Force fire crash and recovery capability, our ability to maintain radio connectivity with the phone-patch, and medical personnel availability in case things didn't go well. These factors helped to alleviate their concerns and strengthened their confidence in the aircraft's ability to safely recover under these conditions.

The left seat pilot, a newly minted aircraft commander, along with an experienced copilot prepared for the final approach. After one low approach, they commenced what I consider one of the best stable precision approaches I've seen from an outside observer. The IFE we had coordinated with our local command post cleared everyone within a 1,000-yard cordon from the active runway except for responding vehicles. One of my flight superintendents had seen folks injured in an earlier mishap when the landing gear truck on a B-52 separated.

As the aircraft approached touch-down, I hoped for the best, feared for the worst, and quietly, crossed my fingers. The aircraft touched down well past my vantage point, but somehow seemed to be moving solidly on rollout. Miraculously, the exceptional approach and touch-down had coincided with the strut actually realigning with the gear sleeve and then settling into its normal configuration.

The aircraft commander brought the aircraft to a stop at the end of the runway and the crew used aircraft ropes to aggressively egress. As I watched, I saw something fall out of the pilot's window. Unfortunately, it was the pilot. He had grabbed the rope and jumped, not realizing that the rope was much longer than the distance to the ground. He hit hard and collapsed. He broke his collarbone and got a few scrapes, but these were the only injuries sustained during this emergency.

As I look back on this mishap, I feel blessed to have had such good folks working for me. We provided the best support for our crew. This is especially important when tackling an emergency that isn't outlined in any Dash 1 guidance and there is a high potential for deadly failure. The professionalism of the crew, despite their serious reservations about the airframe's integrity on recovery, was truly heart warming and indicative of the high standards we have come to expect from our aviators. Because I engaged my local chain of command well after we had figured out our plan of attack, I cannot say that this was a textbook coordination exercise on my part. However, our team rose to the occasion and did a phenomenal job recovering this badly damaged KC-135. ▶

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