

By Ltjg. Sonia Barrantes

Our mission was a standard, night-SEAD from our home base in Atsugi, Japan. I was the second-most junior ECMO in the squadron, and I was in the front seat with the most junior pilot. We had a more experienced Cat. I ECMO in the back, along with a former FRS instructor. Our weather brief and ATIS were calling the field broken at 1,500 feet.

At engine start, we got an advisory call from Badman, the air-wing-duty officer (AWODO), saying the radar at Yokota AFB had been hit by lightning, and services would be degraded. Yokota provides our departure, arrival, and PAR services, so we called back to ask if we still were cleared to launch in spite of Yokota's radar problem. The AWODO replied they were not canceling the launch.

The only gripe on our jet we were concerned about was a freely spinning compass card that had been signed off after switching out a box. Our mission commander previously had flown in this jet and was skeptical the problem was fixed; however, the compass card worked 4.0 during our taxi. As we approached the holdshort, a radio call told all aircraft that Yokota AFB, our primary divert, was calling zero-zero. Because Atsugi's weather held steady at 1,500 broken, and other military divers were briefed as options, we decided to take off anyway.

After takeoff, we quickly climbed into solid IMC at 2,000 feet. As we went to clean up the wings, it immediately was obvious the slats were stuck partly out. We bunted the aircraft twice, and still the slats remained out. As I went to pull out the checklist, my pilot told me the compass card was spinning freely, ratcheting, and randomly

Just Another Standard



reversing direction of spin. We coordinated with departure control to troubleshoot overhead the field, and we followed shortly with a request for no-gyro vectoring. Our TACAN needle was unusable, our GPS was down, and our only navigation information came from our INS steering page. We were IMC in mild to moderate turbulence, with lightning every 15 to 20 seconds. We

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simultaneously tried to troubleshoot the situational indicator and heading-reference system as we went through the flaps/slats-fail-to-retract checklist. We were able to clean up the wings, but we had more to do before we were on deck.

We decided to return and land, but we had to decide with what configuration. My pilot was adamant he was going to stay in a known con-

figuration and would not dirty-up the wings, so we were committed to a no-flap/no-slat approach.

We had called tower and asked them to rig the short-field gear on the active runway. But 20 minutes later, they called back and said they couldn't. Another factor in our runway decision was our situational indicator and heading-reference-system issues. We were unable to safely shoot a PAR without a heading source, and there was no ILS to the active runway. We decided to fly the no-flap/no-slat approach to an arrested landing on the off-duty runway—with a four-knot tailwind. After dumping fuel, we estimated we would have a two- or three-knot buffer before we exceeded the maximum tire speed of 175 knots.

After almost an hour of no-gyro vectoring in IMC, we finally commenced the ILS with an extended final leg. We had dumped as much fuel as possible to lower our approach speed; we had enough gas for one more pass, with no divert. Because of our increased approach speed, our nose-gear remained barberpoled until two miles from touchdown. We broke out at three-quarters mile to an arrested landing. Five minutes after landing, we were sitting on the runway, waiting to get out of the gear, when the field went to zero-zero.

Although our crew coordination was excellent throughout the flight, we agree the more prudent course of action would have been to dirty-up again and come back around to land, instead of trying to clean-up the wings. However, we also agree once

we had cleaned-up, it was an acceptable decision to maintain a known configuration. Although we acted within regulations, we also boxed ourselves in by taking off with rapidly deteriorating weather in the vicinity of our destination and a questionable heading display. 

Ltjg. Barrantes flies with VAQ-136.