

LOW-FUEL

By Lt. Matt W. Knowles

Fuel management in the H-46, with its short legs, is an important skill to master. This fact came to light on a cargo move.

HC-11 Det 2, assigned to USS *Nimitz*, not only stood out as different, but more like a facial mole in the CVN CAG. I say that to emphasize two views: A mole can be a beautiful thing or an eyesore—depending on how it is presented.

Our mission was to provide logistics support and inner defense for USS *Nimitz* as it transited around South America. This was a scheduled homeport change from Norfolk to San Diego after three years in the yards. It is important to mention the time in the yards because many of the ship's crew never had been to sea. Furthermore, we were embarked with CVWR-20, reservists based in NAS Atlanta.

Two weeks into the trip, our first stop was scheduled to be Rio de Janeiro. Because of security concerns following Sep. 11, 2001, however, the liberty portion of the port call was cancelled. In comes the “Deuce” of HC-11 for logistics runs to the beach. Putting aside the growing pains of an HC det and deployment aboard a CVN with a reserve wing, the pilots and aircrewmembers of the det were excited about their first real mission. It's what we do, and we do it very well.

The past two weeks had been filled with acronyms like ULT, SUW and SSC, many of which we had to look up after every air-ops meeting. The task was to fly into Galeao Antonio Carlos Jobim Airport. We would land at the military side of the airport, where a beach det staged the various cargo loads to be delivered to the ship. Two aircraft were to fly in, pick up five pallets each, and return to the ship for shutdown and offload.

Let me spell out the ship's idea of how this would be conducted. First, the ship would “plan” to be no more than 60 miles away, operating with the Brazilian Navy. This plan included touch-and-goes by Brazilian Navy A-4s, SH-3s, and a Super Lynx operating from Brazilian ships. Second, we would not take on fuel at the beach. We were concerned about security and the quality of fuel we might be taking on, not to mention returning to the ship with JP-8. Third, we were to remain engaged to avoid the risk of shutting down. If we couldn't restart, we would be unable to return to the ship (darn!). Fourth, the ship would be sending in the COD with an inspection-security working-party team to help support the onload and to provide a security perimeter.

We briefed the event as a formation flight, manned Sideflare 60 and Sideflare 63, and planned for a 1515 launch, with a 1645 recovery. I would be with the det OinC in SF 60; SF 63 had an experienced HAC and an H2P who was on his last work-up and H2P cruise before his HAC board. Both crews had plenty of H-46 experience.

We were flying our second mission of the day. Everything had gone OK during the same run earlier that morning. The ORM factor was medium. Weather was CAVU and not an issue. By 1630, both aircraft were ops normal, airborne, calling 2+00 hours to splash. The ship had launched us 60 miles away and over an hour later than planned.

The flight to the beach earlier that day had introduced us to the unique Brazilian-Portuguese language when talking with the controllers. To say they were hard to understand would be a gross understatement.

After flying 40 minutes, the OinC and I landed and found the military ramp. I remained with the aircraft while the OinC went into base ops to file the return VFR flight plan. Just as he left the aircraft, I noticed

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the COD departing with the inspection-security working party assigned to help load the helo. Problem one: Now the aircrewmembers were left with two Brazilians and one forklift driver to load five pallets per aircraft. This evolution would be very time-consuming.

After we were loaded, I called clearance delivery for our VFR flight to the ship—getting the clearance took another 15 minutes. Sitting on deck and spinning this whole time, we discussed the fuel state of Dash 2 (SF 63). They had expressed a concern for fuel. We had about 30 minutes of fuel left, just enough to fly the 60 miles to the ship. Earlier that day, the ship had assured us they would be inside that 60-miles range—right!

Finally, we were off the deck. The sun was resting just over the Brazilian mountains, and Rio looked great at dusk. Nagging at the back of my mind, however, was this fuel issue. Dash 2 had left with slightly less gas than we had, but we pressed on. After clearing the beach line at 15 miles, the fuel situation looked serious. We finally received a TACAN lock; DME read 57 miles away—the ship had been more than 70 miles away when we left the airport.

The OinC immediately called the ship and requested they close—we were at a low-fuel state. I glanced at the fuel-quantity indicator. I swear it said 425 pounds per side, 25 minutes of fuel. I was about to open my mouth when the OinC, in a low voice, said, “We’re not going to make it.” I took that statement to heart, made the best standard-rate turn I ever have made, and headed back to the beach.

That sinking feeling still was there, but I felt much better. Although there had been plenty of chatter earlier in the day—from Dash 2 on our common frequency—the circuit now was quiet. They were sticking close to us in perfect form position. Once again, we were in the realm of the Brazilian controllers. We managed to make

it back to the airbase, but low-fuel lights now were on steady. After a normal shutdown, we all breathed a sigh of relief.

We waited for the fuel truck and used an English-to-Spanish-to-Portuguese translation to work out the payment. With full bags of gas and the whole ship and airwing aware of our short legs, we returned to mother about 16 hours after the first brief for the day. Fortunately, earlier that day, we all had been afforded an opportunity to re-rack while the Brazilians were bouncing on our deck.

Many factors played into our long day and low-fuel-state landing. The ship tried to work with the Brazilians and had managed to get out of our “arranged” return leg. The logistical problems of getting us loaded on the beach had been compounded by the untimely loss of the working party, which extended our time on deck. Even after five straight days of flying in and out of Rio, we never did get a better turnaround time on the VFR clearance. We learned to call well in advance while we were on APU power.

The most important factor was getting fuel on the beach. No one would have lost any sleep if we had taken on fuel. Better yet, they would have preferred we shut down, loaded the cargo, taken on fuel, and left. This scenario was the norm the rest of our time in Rio, as well as in all the other South American ports. I don’t think there was a barrier or lack of communication; rather, we allowed the ship and CAG to come into our cockpit and manage the fuel for us. 

Lt. Knowles flies with HC-11.