

If It's Not One Thing, It's Another

By Lt. Jim Morse

The crew was ready for a breather after a month of high-ops tempo at Masirah AB, Oman. Much to our delight, Drew Carey, Wayne Newton, and two Dallas Cowboy cheerleaders were scheduled for a morale visit to share their comedy, music, and pom-pom tricks. Unfortunately, as the day approached, it became apparent our crew would miss the show to go flying.

After we rotated, the port mainmount gave us an unsafe indication when we selected the gear up. After completing the NATOPS procedures for an unsafe gear-up indication, we decided the malfunction was with an uplock switch. A gear problem meant we had to return the aircraft. Before we could land, though, we had to dump and burn down 20,000 pounds of fuel to be under our max-landing weight. No problem—fuel jettison is a common practice for the mighty Orion. We returned our JP-5 to its origins as we held over the Gulf of Oman. We were bringing home a broken airplane, but the crew was excited because they would be back to see the cheerleaders.

I asked my radar operator to drop the electro-optical camera to inspect the port gear. While scanning past the nose gear, we saw something wrong. Although it was night and was hard to see, we saw fluid streaming down the nose gear. Later, we learned the fluid leaked from the landing-gear-regulator valve that had a stripped and cracked nut. It wasn't bad enough to require turning off our hydraulic pumps. However, my concern was collapsing the nose gear at the higher gross-weight landing.

Everyone sitting near the plane-of-propeller rotation was moved aft. I had all the crew members don their

helmets. We made a final turn toward the field, got wind updates, and completed the emergency-landing brief and checklists.

To make things interesting, the chips light on the No. 4 engine began to flicker, which usually indicates large chunks of metal in the oil stream.

I initially planned to use the 10,000-foot runway to maximize time off the nosewheel. However, with

an impending engine failure, I decided to use 07, the 8,500-foot runway. By choosing the shorter runway, I removed the 10-knot, unfavorable crosswind factor. Because of our close proximity to the field and high gross weight, the engine with the chips light was not shut down. Power-lever movements were small and gradual

two aircraft approaching the 180 as Pilatus PC9 training aircraft. The PC9 is the export version of our new T6 Texan II (JPATS). Through 6.0 DME, one aircraft made it inside the 90 and announced he was a full stop. We again relayed to tower we were an emergency. My mouth dropped when the controller cleared the other aircraft to land.

At 4.5 DME and under 1,000 feet AGL, I announced we were waving off. The PC9 had turned toward a taxiway but still was on the runway. The other aircraft waved off just inside the 180. My flight engineer advanced power to normal-rated, and we slowly climbed out to pattern altitude. We made a four-engine landing on the subsequent pass. I held the nose off as long as possible, then gently lowered it to the deck. For once today, we had no problems. Our timing was not quite quick enough though: We just missed the liberty show.

When I got back to the squadron, I called tower to see what the controller was thinking. He said the PC-9 "was almost clear." He also said he was familiar with that aircraft's limitations and knew the aircraft would have no problem getting off the runway. Still, he cleared me to land with an aircraft on the runway.

While more frustrating than frightening, this experience taught me several lessons. Be wary of complacent controllers. "Almost clear" and knowing aircraft type cannot account for variables the PC9 could have encountered, like a blown tire or flameout. While he knew the limitations of the PC9, he obviously was unfamiliar with my aircraft's limitations and was unsympathetic to a P-3C in an emergency. I let the controller know he put peoples' lives in danger.

Plan for the worst situation. A chips light warrants a shutdown unless an emergency exists, requiring power. What if we had elected to secure No. 4? Our three-engine rate of climb would have been extremely limited with the inability to raise gear, high gross weight, and high ambient temperature.

Next time the Dallas Cowboy cheerleaders stop by your hangar, just put in a liberty chit. 

Lt. Morse flew with VP-40 and currently flies with VT-10.



Photo by Matthew J. Thomas

on No. 4. We declared an emergency.

Finally, when you thought the fun almost was over, I noticed other traffic in the pattern as I rolled onto a 10-mile final for an extended, descending right base to 07. An Omani controller was in the tower, instead of USAF controllers—a common occurrence when Omani aircraft are flying.

At 7.5 DME on final, I clearly could identify the