

Don't Touch the Money

by Lt. John Hellmann

We had been doing everything right, but we still ended up all wrong. The way ahead was covered in fog. We had no communications with ATC, and both our helos had minimum fuel. How did we get in this predicament?

Our mission had been to ferry a pair of H-46s from Whidbey Island to San Diego. Our aircrews included four experienced aircraft commanders and two experienced crew chiefs. Bringing our aircraft back safe and sound was our only concern.

Those who have been to Whidbey Island in December need no description of the weather. A day without freezing temperatures and low ceilings is the exception to the rule. Being from sunny San Diego, we were all extra sensitive to weather hazards. We knew that glorious San Diego days were not going to come our way.

Freezing temperatures and low ceilings kept us from leaving on day one. Our wingman's radar altimeter was working intermittently, so we couldn't fly IFR. The weather cleared on day two, but, after another minor maintenance problem, our wingman wasn't ready to leave beautiful Oak Harbor, Wash. A FEDEX delivery, a maintenance all-nighter, and an FCF later, we were ready to go on day four after a full night's rest.

Day four brought back the poor weather, which was to worsen over the next two weeks. It was special VFR down through Puget Sound as far as Tacoma, but we decided a little bit of progress was better than

none. When we reached Tacoma, we planned to traverse the valley along Interstate 5. Fog in low hills squelched this plan, and our fallback route (west to the coast) was cut off by a wall of clouds through the mountains. As briefed, we diverted to McChord AFB and waited.

National weather forecasts indicated that if we did not get south within the next two days, we likely would spend Christmas in the great Northwest. The weather inland through the valley still was doubtful, but the weather along the Oregon coast was reported CAVU as far as our destination at Coos Bay, only two hours away. As the weather in the Sound lifted a bit, we decided to head for the coast, even though there was only sporadic UNICOM radio coverage for 150 miles along the leg.

Shortly after takeoff, our wingman reported an intermittent leak in the transmission. We cautiously decided to return to troubleshoot. The leak ceased, and we decided to move out. We already had burned 20 minutes of our three hours of gas, but we opted not to top off since we were only two hours from our destination.

We pushed through the mountains by going above the clouds, assured by the weather folks that the weather was clear on the coast. Sure enough, we were greeted by beautiful sunny skies as we neared the Pacific Ocean. Who said we could not get San Diego weather in the Northwest? A feeling of elation swept through both cockpits. As we marveled at the beauty of the coast, speculation about the