

Single-Engine Over

Afghanistan

By Lt. Lucas Kadar

CVW-14 had been supporting Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) for two weeks on board USS *Abraham Lincoln*. The Tomcatters of VF-31 were fragged for night CAS, working with ground operations. The F-14D Super Tomcat carried a forward air controller (airborne) crew, who were paired in mixed section with an FA-18C. The night launch and the transit north were uneventful. A beautiful moon took the edge off the evening and allowed us plenty of time to avoid looking through a “soda straw” with NVGs.

The tanking plan was crucial for every mission. The first tanker we hit was a “mother ship” KC-10—plenty of love there. We topped off and headed to our operating area. After being on station for a while, it was time to top off again, this time with a specially modified L-1011. These aircraft are hilarious: They look like a mix between a Transformer and a Star Destroyer, with a disco floor painted on the bottom. At one point, I thought a tractor beam was going to come out and pull us in.

Five minutes after plugging into the drogue of this thing, we almost were topped off when I saw we were sliding aft and eventually out of the basket. With the throttles at mil, we were unable to stay in position. A check of the engine instruments indicated the right motor was rolling back. No stall warnings showed in the HUD—no overtemp alarms, either—just the gradual loss of an engine.

After completing the NATOPS procedures for loss of an engine, it was apparent the motor didn’t want to relight. An attempt to cross-bleed the motor produced stall indications, so we stopped trying to relight the engine.

Fortunately, the rest of the flight didn’t play out like a simulator NATOPS check. Both hydraulics worked 4.0, with the bidirectional pump assuming the duties of the inoperative side for three hours. Fuel management and transfer also worked as advertised. Our standing guidance was for emergency aircraft to recover aboard the CVN whenever possible—as long as the emergency wasn’t time critical and could be isolated. Getting aboard was preferred over the risks of diverting into possibly unsecured or dangerous foreign airfields.

We jettisoned our bombs and flew an uneventful, single-engine night trap. We were back for mid-rats, replenishing ourselves with heart-lock grease, using the tried and true triple-double slider (two meat patties, two pieces of cheese, two fried eggs). Looking back, this may have been the most dangerous part of the entire evening.

Emergency procedures become ingrained in our heads through familiarization with NATOPS and practice in the simulators. The reason the motor failed was attributed to an uncommanded transfer to SEC mode, coupled with a known anomaly of being unable to relight a GE-110 motor at altitude under certain circumstances. Again, Grumman Iron and the mighty Tomcat brought us back to mom when the cards were stacked against us.

Lt. Kadar flies with VF-31.