

Crew Resource Management

Situational Awareness

Assertiveness

Decision Making

Communication

Leadership

Adaptability/Flexibility

Mission Analysis

Calm Before the Storm



By Lt. Vince Johnson

I launched on a warm, starry night on a SAREX, with my squadron maintenance officer and one of our more senior AWs. We took our time flying down the St. Johns River, through Jacksonville, enjoying the city lights along the way. After clearing NAS Jacksonville's airspace to the south, I ran my crew through a couple of SAR scenarios, and both pilots rebased their night Doppler-approach quals—piece of cake, I thought. We had time for another river run and a few laps in the pattern before we called it an evening.

As we climbed to let base know we were headed back, a nasty surprise hit me. The SDO had been trying to recall us because of a fast-moving storm system working its way from the north. My AW turned on the radar, and all three of us looked intently as our gadget painted a huge wall of storms coming at us.

A smart man would've flown the five miles to NAS Jax and sat this one out, but I've never claimed to be a smart man. Dinner, Seinfeld, and my bed were calling me. I think everyone in the helicopter heard the same tune because, just then, the MO said, "I think we can beat it." After a big affirmative from our AW, we were headed back up the river as fast as our Seahawk could take us.

As we cleared downtown Jacksonville, the clouds were bearing down on us. The green radar display showed we weren't going to win this race. Did I decide to turn back for NAS Jax? Nah! I decided to call approach and request VFR direct to Mayport. This

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plan involved leaving the safety of the river, but cutting the corner would be quicker. Besides, the Jacksonville area is flat, no big towers (except downtown) exist, and nobody else is dumb enough to fly in this weather. We pressed on.

We just had gotten the helo pointed to the head of the TACAN needle when we ran into the storm—a great big rain-and-lightning fest, the kind that slaps your plane and loosens fillings.

We already had descended to 400 feet to clear the clouds. Mayport was about nine miles away on the DME, but I couldn't see anything. "Turn around," I thought. I considered turning, but that would mean flying back through the storm, with all the towers and buildings in the city.

We were cinching down our harnesses and talking about options when some benevolent being whacked me upside the head. We were flying over Craig airfield, about five miles to the west of Mayport! Those runway lights were the only things I could see, and that was through the chin bubble. We quickly called Craig and requested a full stop. Tower granted us any runway and

any way we could get there. I think the tower rep then ran to get a video camera.

I turned south to set up for a left downwind. My airspeed dropped, but we sure were hauling the mail over the ground. Turning to final, the wind gave us a sweet IAS (for a helo), although we hardly were moving. I could make out the runway lights but not the ground. I set up to land somewhere between the lights, checked the VSI, and waited for terra firma. Contact, collective down, and we taxied clear of the runway.

We held on the taxiway, unable to see. Shutting down was not an option—the winds were way out of limits. We passed our time by betting on getting hit by lightning or getting blown over. After 30 minutes, the weather cleared enough for us to hop over to NS Mayport—home sweet home.

You never are too close or too far from home to catch get-home-itis. Those of you shaking your heads probably can think of a time when you pressed home, rather than diverted for weather, fuel, or mechanical problems—it's natural. This flight is one case where experience allowed us to make the wrong decision. 🦅

Lt. Johnson flew SH-60Bs at the time of this incident, he currently flies with VAQ-141.