Is It Luck or Just Me?

by Lt. Greg Robinson

Lately, my flying life has become too interesting. Writing this article is an attempt to end my recent plague of engine problems. At this point, I'll try anything! They're calling me "Black Cloud." No one wants to fly with me or be my friend. Dogs see me and start howling inconsolably. My image doesn't show up well in mirrors and photographs...

Cartoon by Allan Amen

Our squadron maintenance and safety stats are just fine, but it seems when I'm on the flight, something goes wrong...Help!

It was a beautiful, clear, spring day over the Med. We'd been airborne for an hour, and had settled into the C-130 over-water routine: The flight engineer quizzed his trainee, and the copilot monitored the radios. I ate lunch while keeping an eye on the instrument panel.

A sudden movement caught my eye. The No. 4 gearbox oil-pressure needle was bouncing like a spin caster with a bass hooked. I pointed at the gauge, tossed my sandwich aside, and announced over the ICS, "Mmrmpph?" In seconds, we watched the oil quantity drop toward zero. The low-oil light came on. Time for my first engine shutdown!

The procedure went smoothly. We had no cargo, plenty of fuel, perfect weather, and were three hours from our det site. We continued home and landed.

In 1,500 flight hours, I'd experienced only one in-flight emergency: a false bleed-air light in a C-12. I knew that some day, I would see a real emergency, and wondered occasionally how I would react. Simulators provide excellent training, but they're not the real thing. This engine failure was reassuring. After an initial heart thump, training and aircrew coordination took over, and we handled the emergency. Nice, but more reassurance was in store.

In June, I was in the right seat, back in CONUS. We'd just left New Orleans and were working the post-takeoff checklist. The loadmaster paused at "wings and aircraft interior."

"Uh, sir, something's dripping out of the number two drain mast. Looks like fuel."

No matter what it was, if it was leaking, we had to shut down the engine. Back at New Orleans, we fixed our seeping manifold drain valve.

In late August, I went to bring a bird home from rework. It was shiny and smelled like a new car. Our FCF was flawless, and we signed the acceptance paperwork, and loaded our bags to go home. Just as the landing gear came up, the No. 3 nacelle's overheat light came on. Bleed-air leak—a serious emergency in a C-130.

While the copilot and flight engineer secured the engine, I declared the emergency. A 90-270 turn and good aircrew coordination brought us to a smooth landing, seconds after we finished the last of our checklists.

The rework crew apologized profusely. They helped us locate and tighten a loose bleed fitting in the nacelle. But two hours later, almost home, the same warning lit up again. We shut down the engine a second time, isolated bleed air from the right wing, and pressed on for another three-engine landing at home plate.

These were all simple, uncomplicated emergencies. All happened in daylight VFR, with no cargo or passengers. That was about to change. In early November, we were fully loaded with 50 Marines, two cargo pallets, and enough fuel to reach Hawaii. We'd settled into our over-water routine again, but this time, I was the one reading a magazine and working the HF. An FE trainee worked the panel, fielding questions from his instructor. Two hours out of Point Mugu, engrossed in a dissertation on the relative merits of various lob wedges, I saw an amber light blink. I stowed my magazine and watched for it again. This time, it stayed on for a half second. It was the utility-hydraulic suction-boost pressure light.

"Hey, chief, are you simulating a hydraulic problem?" Dumb question. The light came on a third time.

"No, sir, that's real. Shut 'em off."

I secured all the hydraulic pumps for the utility system. The load master soon reported that the utility reservoir was empty. Somewhere, we had a big leak.

The FE spoke up. "Sir, we've got fluid coming out of number one."

Faint, red streaks trailed back from the access panels on the nacelle.

"OK," I said, "that's a visible fluid leak, so let's secure number one." The shutdown went smoothly, but presented new problems. We were entering an area of IMC, near the top of an icing layer. I declared our emergency with

Oceanic, and requested a return to Point Mugu. They asked for our preferred routing. In the time it took to pick up the chart and locate our position, our HF antenna iced up. We could no longer transmit—just receive. Oceanic became increasingly concerned about our lost contact and began asking airliners for relays.

Meanwhile, we quickly realized that we could not maintain altitude with a full load, deicing systems running, and only three engines. But there was an airliner somewhere behind and below us. Oceanic had just told him he could climb when he'd passed us. We didn't want to make an uncleared IMC descent into his path. Time for some ORM.

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We turned 90 degrees for our descent, planning to head for the mainland between airways. Our descent immediately brought us into moderate icing and moderate turbulence. The pilot had his hands full just flying the aircraft. I monitored the HF and plugged GPS points so he could navigate. The FE monitored systems and kept the icing under control. A third pilot sat at the nav table, handling VHF comms with airliners. The aircrew in back took care of our airsick Marines. Once we were stable, we reviewed our checklists and systems to make sure we didn't forget anything. Eventually, we restored utility hydraulics, dumped fuel, and made a smooth 3-engine landing at Point Mugu. That flight ended uneventfully, but my streak continued.

In January, we were above Colorado, headed for the East Coast from San Diego. I was admiring the unlimited visibility in the crisp winter air. Suddenly, I noticed a steady red light.

"Uh, we've got a fire light in number two." The FE and I did a quick scan of the engine instruments as the pilot stowed his newspaper. The gauges looked normal.

The pilot said, "You two shut it down. I'll take the radios." With FE concurrence, I pulled No. 2 to feather. The loadmaster came over the ICS.

"Number two looks good. No smoke or leaks or anything."

"OK," I said, "Confirm number two fire handle?" The FE agreed, and I pulled the T-handle. The loadmaster came on again.

"Number two is standing tall. Good feather."

I continued, "There are no secondaries. Let's hold the fire bottle." The FE and loadmaster immediately agreed. We completed the engine-shutdown checklist per NATOPS and isolated bleed air from the left wing. As we had suspected since the loadmaster's first ICS call, the fire light was a false indication. It remained on and steady until we landed in Dallas—the closest divert with good weather and C-130 assistance.

Six emergency engine-shutdowns in less than 180 flight hours. Different aircraft, different engines, different causes, different crews. Five of the six shutdowns were real emergencies—not false indications. But superb aircrew coordination, excellent communication, and complete systems knowledge kept everything under control. Truly, we make our own luck.

What have I learned from this? In our business, emergencies are inevitable. From the first day of flight school, we learn to expect the unexpected. We study, we practice, we review. We keep an eye on the instrument panel. But we can't escape human nature. In quiet periods, we drift toward overconfidence. After we face a real emergency, we either pat ourselves on the back or look accusingly in the mirror; but we assume our turn in the barrel is over for a while.

Instead, we must understand and remember that every flight is a new toss of the dice. We must stay ready. I've experienced an extraordinary statistical fluke in the past months. Was it any more extraordinary than my previous 1,500 hours, with no emergencies? It definitely made me a better pilot.

Lt. Robinson flies with VR-53.