

# Shades of Payne

Looking inside the cockpit,  
we saw nobody.

Cockpit photo by LCdr. "Pepper" Boone  
Photo-composite modification by Allan Amen

by Capt. Kevin Kretzschmar

I had an interesting hop on May 23, 2000, a Tuesday night. I was flying with two other squadron FA-18s, conducting a radar-intercept training hop 80 to 100 miles off the San Diego coast in a warning area. At 1855, we heard a call from Beaver Control. They told us about an aircraft in the area that nobody was talking to. It had just appeared on their radar scope, and it was heading our way. We rogered up and continued with our mission.

Several minutes later, Beaver Control came back up our frequency and told us to stay above 15,000 feet, because the mystery aircraft was now closer (at 10,500 feet). They still hadn't been able to communicate with it, and the last radio transmission from it had said something about a person on board being sick. Neither Beaver Control, LA Center nor SoCal Approach had been able to talk to anyone in this aircraft for quite some time. Beaver asked if we could investigate. We agreed,

knocked off our mission, and sent the other two aircraft home. (They were approaching bingo fuel.) We got an initial vector of 140 degrees for 10 miles (behind us). We turned around and found the radar contact on our scope within seconds.

We locked it up and began to chase it down. The aircraft was heading 210 degrees, at 10,500 feet, doing 190 knots. It didn't take long for our 500-knot Hornet to catch the twin-engine, Beechcraft King Air. We gained a tally and slowed to join on its right wing. We lowered the flaps to half, to help us maintain controllability at 190 knots. We settled in 3 to 5 feet off its right wing. Looking inside the cockpit, we saw nobody.

That's right, nobody. Nobody was at the controls, nobody was in the cockpit. We both uttered the usual expletive at once. We then inspected the passenger cabin. The Super King Air 200 holds up to 10 pax. We saw no movement in the passenger cabin, no faces at the windows,

no silhouettes of heads. The aircraft was on autopilot, droning 210 degrees toward the deep blue sea. It was heading directly opposite of land. We were now about 100 miles off the coast. Payne Stewart came to mind.

We crossed under the aircraft to get a look at the left side. Nothing. Empty cockpit, and to the best of our knowledge, empty passenger compartment. We relayed this information to Beaver Control. They asked us some questions, but the bottom line was that N24CV was in deep trouble.

We crunched some numbers and figured out what a no-kidding, emergency bingo-fuel profile to Miramar would be from our present position of 160 miles out. The sun was beginning to set and was creating shadows and glare, which actually helped us. We had now been flying with this aircraft for approximately 15 minutes, and we had about 10 minutes max left on station. We relayed this info to Beaver. As we closed in for a better view, we now saw what looked like a sharp contrast between the pilot's beige-colored, leather seatback and a whitish seat. After discussing it, we were convinced someone was in the pilot's seat, but he was slumped over, facing the copilot's seat, unconscious. We couldn't see anything but his back. We continued like this for another five minutes, relaying this info to Beaver and trying to raise comms with the pilot on both UHF and VHF emergency guard frequencies. We asked for an update of San Clemente Island's weather and reset a new bingo to San Clemente. We could now remain with the King Air for another five to seven minutes.

After several more minutes, our comms with Beaver began to fade, and we relied on a relay from a Navy S-3 that was operating near San Clemente Island to pass info to and from Beaver Control. We were now approximately 150 miles from San Clemente and 200 miles from San Diego. Then we hit some turbulence, and both aircraft pitched and rolled a little bit. As we watched, we shouted with joy as we saw movement in the cockpit. My best guess is that the turbulence was enough to wake this pilot from his unconscious or incapacitated state. He sat up but was obviously still out of it, as he swayed back and forth. He turned and faced front but then collapsed over the cockpit glareshield and instruments. "Noooo!" we shouted to each other. He remained there for 10 to 15 seconds then he sat back up, still swaying. He looked to his left and appeared startled to see a Marine Corps FA-18 flying on his left wing.

He reached up and put on his headset, trying to signal to us that he could not hear or speak (we figured his radio had failed). We both motioned for him to turn around with our hands. He swayed a little more, focusing on his instruments and started a right hand turn. We cheered and, for a second, breathed a sigh of relief. We were now heading 030 degrees, directly for San Diego. He was still not coherent, as he swayed back and forth, at times resting his head on the glareshield. We passed this info on to Beaver control along with his current latitude and longitude, altitude, heading, and airspeed. We were now emergency fuel.

It was my first bingo-fuel profile. We accelerated to .82 Mach and climbed at that constant speed to FL390 for the 120-mile flight to San Clemente. Leveling off and throttling back to 256 knots, we hoped for the civilian pilot's well-being. We landed at San Clemente just before dark. While sitting in the fuel pits, we asked the tower for the status of the King Air. They replied that Beaver Control had lost radar contact approximately 10 minutes after we left. Our hopes suddenly sank. We were fairly certain that the pilot either blacked out again or ran out of fuel. Fifteen minutes later, we were refueled and airborne again, asking Beaver if they needed any assistance. They told us that the weather in the area was now 400-foot overcast, and there was a Navy S-3 on station and several Navy ships en route. We headed toward home for an uneventful recovery. We were upset that it ended the way it had.

I had been flying with Lt. Hunter "Roach" Ellis, who's an instructor with me. He called the Coast Guard after we landed to find out the status of the King Air. The pilot had survived! He had been picked up and was being flown to a Navy ship in the area for treatment. We were relieved and curious. Did he flame out? Did he crash? We didn't find out until the next morning. Roach called me to tell me to come in for a meeting with the media. I showed up and was informed by the press at Miramar that the pilot had apparently flamed out both engines (fuel starvation). He then dead-sticked it into the ocean, just at sunset and had survived the impact. He climbed on top of the aircraft to await rescue. It wasn't long before an aircraft and a helo arrived on the scene, using the coordinates we had passed. He was plucked from the 60-degree Pacific and flown to the Navy ship for observation and treatment. Amazing!

The next day I was interviewed by four television stations, two radio stations and four newspapers. We were part of the number-one news story in San Diego

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