

## **HANGAR FLYING by CDR F. J. Wright AvNum 1312**

### **T'was a dark and stormy Night (in Port Angeles, Washington)**

After I retired from the Coast Guard, and was flying commercially, I would ask my flying partner a question prior to relating any of my Coast Guard flying stories. The question was, "do you know the difference between a fairy tale, a sea story, and a Coast Guard search and rescue story?" Usually, after a bemused "no" I'd respond, "a fairy tale starts off - once upon a time, a sea story starts off - this ain't no bull, and a Coast Guard search and rescue story starts off – t'was a dark and stormy night aarrggghh".

This was an attempt on my part to rate the veracity and likelihood of my impending tale for the listener. Fairy tale being the least likely to be factually accurate and the search and rescue story being the most likely to have actually occurred without too much embellishing in the telling.

Well , t'was a dark and stormy night on February 7, 1969, at Coast Guard Air Station (CGAS) Port Angeles, Washington. I was standing the HU-16E ready Copilot duty with my Aircraft Commander LT David Ira Nelson. Dave referred to himself as the world's oldest Lieutenant at the age of thirty five. Dave had started flying with the U.S. Air Force, then flew with Air America, and North Central Airlines (a precursor to Republic Airlines which later merged with Northwest Airlines). Dave then joined the Coast Guard and did a tour at CGAS Sangley Point followed by a tour at CGAS Port Angeles where this story took place. In my opinion, Dave was one of the finest and smoothest pilots I've ever flown with in my 36 year flying career.

On this particular night, there was a big Pacific cold front moving through the area. Although it was raining at Port Angeles, the winds weren't too high, but they were squirrely. At the west end of the east/west runway the winds were westerly at 10 to 15 knots. At the east end of the runway the winds were easterly at 10 to 15 knots. At around 2000 in the evening, Rescue Coordination Center (RCC) Seattle called and launched us to locate and assist a Navy Whidbey Island P-2 Neptune. The P-2 crew had lost their avionics with the exception of their High Frequency Radio and their radar. The P-2 pilot's intention was to fly south of the Olympic Mountains, in a westerly direction, until they were offshore. The crew then hoped to descend to visual conditions and if successful in becoming visual, land at Hoquiam, Washington.

As we taxied out in HU-16E CG 1275, our plan was to takeoff to the east, and when we could, turn south as close as possible to the Olympic Mountains to lessen the enroute time. We further intended to effect the eventual intercept with the P-2 and escort it offshore and back to Hoquiam.

As we approached the departure end of the runway I was happy the winds weren't too high, but I was leery about the impending 20 to 30 knot wind shift. I rationalized, at least we would have a head wind at the eastern end of the runway. With the mixtures rich and the power set at 51.5 inches of manifold pressure and 2800 RPM, Dave released the brakes and we were on our way. The HU-16E didn't exactly slam you into the back of your

seat on the takeoff roll. The takeoff, in my opinion, was more like "The Little Engine that Could", I think I can, I think I can. The HU-16E seemed to sneak up on its' takeoff speed. At any rate, on this night, the HU-16E's magical takeoff process of noise over gravity worked once again and we were airborne.

At no higher than 100 ft AGL we encountered moderate to severe turbulence and a very strong southwesterly wind. The close southerly proximity of the Olympic Mountains to the Air Station had blocked the strong winds from the airfield, however, the strong winds explained the strange wind conditions we had encountered on the runway. These winds also immediately explained the turbulence.

We next contacted Seattle Center requesting direct to the Port Townsend VOR and radar vectors to intercept the distressed P-2. As we turned south climbing to our assigned altitude of 6000 ft., the ride bad worsened with constant altitude deviations of +1- 300ft. As we entered the overcast, I did a DME ground speed check, and found we were doing 85 kts groundspeed. This gave us a headwind component of 65 kts and an actual wind speed of over 80 kts.

We again contacted Seattle Center, requesting an altitude of 8,000 ft, looking for smoother air, which we mercifully found reaching 9,000 ft. Dave had me leave the engines at climb power in an effort to increase our ground speed. Dave had been hand flying since the HU-16E "autopilot" had no altitude or heading hold function. (Of course, any autopilot I'd ever seen would've been inadequate in that turbulence. Helo pilots be still! Compared to rest of the fixed winged world, even then, the HU-16E was primitive.)

With the smoother air, I settled in to write our first Situation Report (SITREP) for the 13th District and other interested parties. After a short period of time, I raised my eyes to the airspeed indicator expecting to see around 175 kts. Instead, I saw 135 kts. I remarked to Dave, "This thing is a piece of junk. We're only doing 135 kts." Dave responded patiently, "Look outside". I first looked at my side sliding window and could see nothing. The side window was covered with ice. I then looked forward at the windshield, and at the bottom of the windshield wiper, there had been an apparent vortex which left a hole 5 to 6 inches deep in ice. We bad acquired this much ice in less than two minutes. As I watched the airspeed indicators, they began to flicker and then went to zero on both sides of the cockpit. Even with the pitot heat on, the pitot tube had iced up. We still had an altitude indication because the unpressurized HU-16E had a static port on the inside of the aircraft for just such an occasion.

Nonetheless, we were now at night, in the clouds with icing, no airspeed indicators and very close to the mountains. This situation was my first experience with conditions that might exceed the capabilities of the airplane I was in. We were also losing altitude.

About this time Seattle Center called and told us that the distressed P-2 had safely landed at Hoquiam.

Dave told me to get a lower altitude from Seattle Center and tell them our situation. I was suddenly struck with obvious, now we're the emergency. My radio voice was like a pubescent teen, cracking up and down several octaves. I tried clearing my voice a couple

of times to no avail. Finally, I squeaked out our situation and requested a lower altitude. Seattle Center cleared us to 5,000 ft. As we descended, the props were intermittently shedding ice and slamming the ice into the side of the plane. This very loud noise wasn't doing much to abate my heightened anxiety levels.

Dave was keeping our pitch and power settings constant. The aircraft couldn't hold altitude and we had been descending even before we got our clearance for a lower altitude. As we approached our assigned 5,000 ft altitude, we were still covered in ice and still descending. I related to Seattle Center we still couldn't hold altitude and needed lower. Seattle Center responded, that in our current position, anything lower than 5,000 ft wouldn't give us standard terrain clearance. I replied, we didn't have any choice, we couldn't hold altitude and we were descending.

Needless to say, I was more than a little apprehensive as we approached 4,000 ft knowing we weren't clear of the mountains. Suddenly, Seattle Center called and cleared us down to 3,000 ft.. Descending through approximately 3,500 ft, we began to shed ice in sheets and we regained our airspeed indicators. Both emergencies (ours and the P-2's) were now over and we returned to CGAS Port Angeles and safely landed. We had been airborne for 1.8 hours.

In the weeks prior to this flight I had seen the movie, "The High and the Mighty". With my helmet bag and sundries in hand, I stopped and looked back at CG 1275, just like John Wayne had stopped and looked back at his crippled DC-4. I then, thankfully and more than a little relieved, proceeded to Operations to finish our summary SITREP.

Several years later, when I was in law enforcement, I viewed a training film about a police officer who hears a noise in a dark city alley. The officer dutifully enters the dark alley to investigate and discovers the noise was made by a cat in a garbage can. The point was, even though the noise turned out to be nothing, the initial stress of properly doing your job by going into the alley was plenty. When I saw this film, my mind wandered back to the CO 1275 and the Navy P2. We didn't accomplish much, but if the weather had precluded the P-2 from landing, we were going to be their last chance. Like all good Coasties, we had done our duty when we launched and headed "down the alley".