Tales of an International Ferry Flight

by Captain Mark J. Cincotta

"Army 14256, flight of two, cleared for takeoff, contact departure." Those were the words clearing two RV-1D Mohawks for the last scheduled International Ferry Flight. The journey was scheduled to cover 30 days, four continents, and 18 countries. Fellow aviators looked at me, CW3 Ross Schoneboom (the pilot of the other RV-1D), and our crew-chiefs, SGT Juan Rodriguez and SPC Todd McKay, with envy. They thought we were on a paid vacation. In actuality an international ferry flight is nothing less than an excellent training exercise for aviators of all experience levels.

Flying the aircraft from Stuart, FL to Camp Humphreys, Korea was a real learning experience. Unfortunately, most Army aviators accumulate thousands of flying hours flying from the airfield to the range, depriving them of the experience and knowledge an international flight has to offer. This was an opportunity to read and understand publications that most of us don't use on a daily basis.

The foreign clearance guide proved to be a useful tool. It's broken down by individual countries and is key in assisting with the entire flight planning process. The foreign clearance guide gave us preferred routing for particular altitudes. It also gave us windows of validity for diplomatic clearances. That was very important since maintenance and weather delays often caused us to miss our actual arrival dates and times. Without the assistance of the foreign clearance guide, we might have attempted unauthorized entries in several instances.

Though we never caused an international incident, there was one time the foreign clearance guide failed us. We received our diplomatic clearance into Singapore from Thailand but not our clearance to transit Malaysian airspace enroute. I made the decision to hold on the ground in Thailand until we could confirm clearance through Malaysian airspace. We were delayed two

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and a half hours. I pulled out the foreign clearance guide and looked up Singapore. The wording was not specific, but Ross and I interpreted it the same. Our clearance was good for 24 hours—*"If unable to comply with time 'window', new ETA should be adjusted in increments of 24 hours from initial clearance time."* No problem, we figured, we'll only be two and a half hours late. As a courtesy, we asked the Thai Air Force to pass a message to all facilities along our route to insure everyone was aware of our delay. They kindly accommodated our request.

Our arrival in Singapore wasn't quite as gracious. I was met at the aircraft by a U.S. Embassy representative requesting I call the U.S. Embassy immediately. Apparently, what the foreign clearance guide meant to say was, *"You will not arrive one second late!"* Oh well, live and learn. Actually, it wasn't that bad. The Singapore government was just trying to stress the importance of meeting scheduled arrival times. In the past, they had a problem with U.S. aircraft showing up whenever they pleased. Their point was well taken, and their assistance was most accommodating. The learning point here: go above and beyond the books. Check and double-check everything. Though not always possible, make every attempt to speak directly with the person issuing the clearance. Anyone who has been on an international flight knows and anyone who gets the opportunity will find out just how difficult a task that is at times. Though the total is not tallied, I spent approximately $1,200 on phone calls. The end result, however, was a smooth transition from country to country.

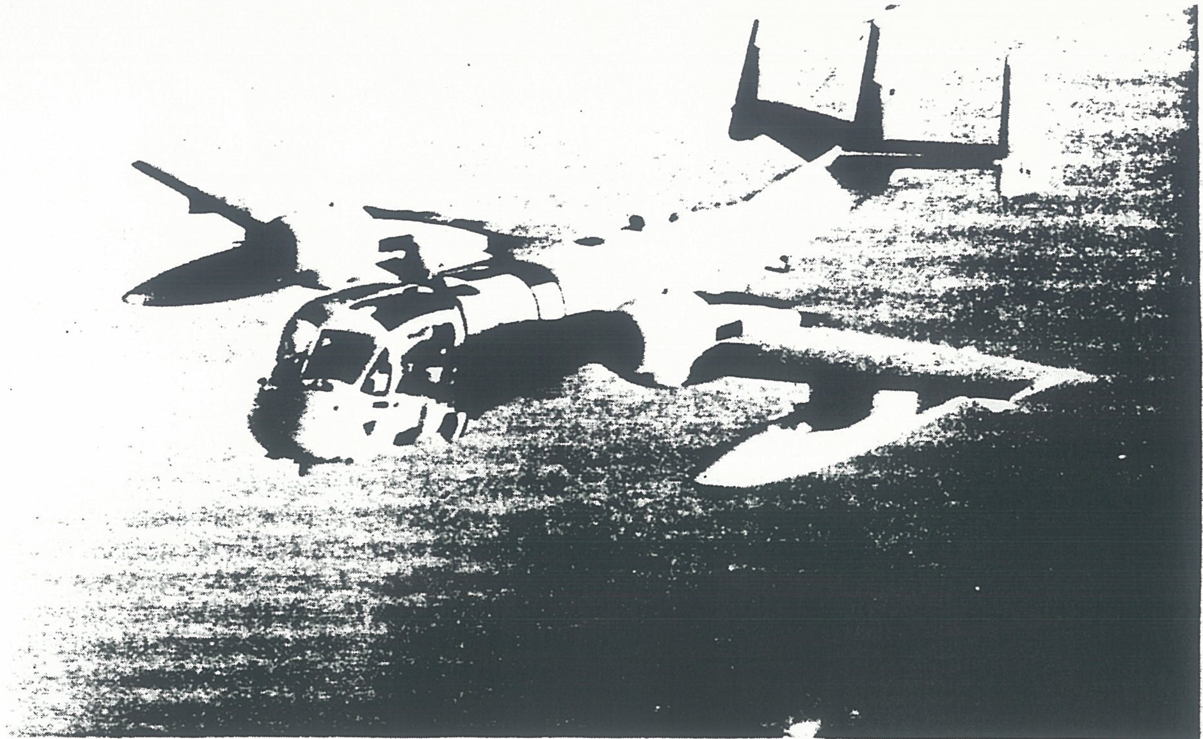
Many considerations played a role in determining how far to move the aircraft each day. For general planning purposes, we could figure an endurance of six hours and fifteen minutes. To meet fuel reserve requirements, we normally had to look for a suitable stopover point within one thousand miles of our departure point. Another major consideration was the availability of fuel. Let's face facts, there are not a lot of places in India to refuel a U.S. Army aircraft. Complicating matters were our orders to use contract fuel. In most cases this was possible; sometimes it wasn't.

We'd planned one leg of the flight from Keflavik, Iceland to Prestwick, Scotland. Two days before our scheduled arrival, we were informed by our headquarters that Prestwick had lost the fuel contract. We were instructed to find another airfield. After reading through the supplement with Ross, we determined we could comply with the request and fly to Mildenhall, England. It would be a long flight, about five and a half hours, but we could make it and still meet all our requirements. We contacted all the necessary Embassies and coordinated our schedule changes to ensure a hassle-free arrival.

Our flight plan was now filed and a good Navy weather briefing was in hand. We were ready to head to England. Just prior to strapping in, I decided to call Mildenhall one last time to confirm our arrival, fuel, and accommodations. Fortunately, I did. During our conversation, Mildenhall Air Traffic Controllers passed a message to us. They told us to plan on a 45 minutes air traffic control delay. This is the point where a Pilot-In-Command (PIC) makes his money. Here's the situation: first, we were instructed not to land in Prestwick due to the lost fuel contract. Second, painstaking measures were taken to ensure the airspace was cleared for arrival in England. Now we would have to go through the same hassles to change it again. Third, a 45 minute delay would be pushing our endurance. (But do we ever get those delays?)

My advice to every pilot flying today: never put yourself in the position to find out. In our case, we had no suitable airfields to land at in case of emergency. As PICs, we must look at every situation and weigh the consequences. Remember that our ultimate goal is to accomplish the mission as safely as possible. That particular day in Iceland, I decided to accept the hassle of coordinating our arrival back to Prestwick. Based on the situation, I felt it was more appropriate to pay a little more for no-contract fuel than to have two aircraft run out of fuel flying a holding pattern somewhere over England.

Everything worked out fine. We refiled to



Prestwick, got another weather briefing, and made what seemed like the millionth phone call to coordinate the change. It was an uneventful flight. Maybe we had enough fuel to get to Mildenhall. Perhaps we would have never received that ATC delay. The bottom line, though, we were on the ground safely and we were still going to Germany the next day. Don't let outside pressures lead you to making a hasty decision. Examine the situation, review the option, acknowledge the consequences, and make a sound decision. No one can ever hold that against you. By the way, for those who follow, Prestwick is renegotiating the fuel contract and things look good. That's good news, because Scotland is almost as beautiful as the two girls working at the Military Airlift Command (MAC) terminal. MAC provided outstanding support, making our arrival and departure hassle-free.

Availability of support upon arrival and departure is another key factor in determining where to stop. Is there a U.S. military installation there? Is there U.S. Embassy support available? Will I have to do this all by myself? These are questions to ask before choosing a stopover location. Without proper planning, arriving in a foreign country would be near impossible.

Where possible we stayed at U.S. military installations. Most of our stops were at U.S. Air Force or Navy bases. Needless to say, they are in the business of handling transient aircrews. At most places we were greeted with a fuel truck, hotel reservations, and transportation. Since the days were very long it was comforting to know that our time spent on the arrival ramp would be kept to a minimum. Host country military bases were equally accommodating. We never encountered any problems from a foreign military service. In some cases, they were even more accommodating than our own services.

Next best were stops where U.S. Embassy officials were present to expedite us through customs and immigration. Probably the best assistance came in Cairo, Egypt. We taxied two miles around Cairo International Airport and parked in front of the main terminal. We were greeted by an expediter from the U.S. Embassy. He had a fuel truck waiting, and as we refueled and performed maintenance, he did the leg

work enabling us to process customs without a hitch. When we finished refueling, the embassy official had completed his journey and met us at the aircraft. He walked us to the front of what seemed to be mile long lines where customs officials met us with a smile and asked us to kindly proceed. Within minutes, we were through the huge airport and in a taxi enroute to Air France's five star hotel, Le Meridian. The embassy official, an Egyptian official, stayed at the hotel with us to offer assistance whenever needed.

Though we were leaving early in the morning, he arranged a vehicle and driver to take us on a tour of the city. Within two hours of landing, we found ourselves ten feet in the air on camels in front of the ancient Egyptian pyramids of Giza. It was times like this that made the months of planning and the headaches of the trip worthwhile. A special thanks to our friends in Egypt.

Though we never arrived anywhere without support, there were a few times where support was minimal. I am qualified to say don't ever land in a foreign country unexpected. The simple things like parking your aircraft and getting from the aircraft to a hotel seem impossible.

An example was our arrival in Kota Kinabalu, Malaysia. The embassy was notified of our arrival time, but when we got there, no one knew who we were. Ground control parked us on the old apron, which is one and a half miles from the main terminal. We had fuel on request and shut down. After thirty minutes and no fuel, Ross called the tower and asked for taxi clearance to the new apron. That was denied, as fuel was on its way. When fuel never showed up, we strapped in, cranked up, and got clearance to taxi. We found our fuel at the main terminal after wasting an hour.

The next hour was spent walking around looking for a place to file the next day's flight plan. When that was complete, we linked back up with the crewchiefs and made a plan to clear customs and find a hotel. Customs pushed us right through without even looking at our passports. We spent another half hour learning how to use Malaysian pay phones so I could call the U.S. Embassy. I finally got through and was informed we had hotel reservations at the Kota Kinabalu Hyatt. From that point, everything went smoothly, but I'm here to say that without support you are truly in the dark. You can't ask for help. The 18 pocket translation dictionaries weren't included in a standard ferry flight publications issue.

Now we have an itinerary. We've looked at our route of flight, we know where our support is and determined where to stop. Passports and visas are in hand and the diplomatic clearance requests have been submitted. What next? Now it's time to learn what being a pilot is all about. Now it's time to strap into that single pilot aircraft and take off into a non-radar environment. It's also time to find out the weather briefing was wrong and your aircraft doesn't fly very well with two tons of clear ice on it. Yes, it's also time to find out that your Inertial Navigation System (INS) does not work, the next Non-Directional Beacon (NDB) is 600 miles away, and you left the instructions for your E6B at home. It's time to learn to expect the unexpected. It's time to earn your flight pay.

The months of prior planning are now complete. We are at the Grumman plant in Stuart, FL ready to set out on a unique flight only a few Army aviators ever experience. Our plan was to file as a flight of two whenever possible, enabling us to assist each other with navigation, radio calls, etc. What we didn't plan on was the 30 hours of solid cloud time we'd soon log.

The first two legs went like clock work. Mostly Visual Flight Rules (VFR) in formation and in radar contact. That ended when we departed the 2nd Aviation Flight Detachment in Newburgh, NY. We filed as a flight of two to Goosebay, Labrador. Soon after departure we were in the clouds and would be for the next four hours. Prior to departure we had discussed an Instrument Meteorological Condition (IMC) break up for separation. Everything was going fine, then my INS locked up. That still didn't pose a problem as there were plenty of Navigational Aids (NAVAIDS) available to

keep me on the airways. What it did was make us think ahead. We were now more aware of what to anticipate and plan for. The next few days would take us across the North Atlantic, where the only NAVAIDS are NDBs which are several hundred miles apart. We would also be in uncontrolled airspace where position reports are required by high frequency radio. Do ours work? It turned out one did and one did not. How do we make the reports? How do I navigate if we are in the clouds? These are questions we discussed and thought out completely.

Though we were PICs of different aircraft, I considered our conversations as effective aircrew coordination. In fact, effective aircrew coordination is what got us from Goosebay to Weisbaden, Germany. In the clouds the whole way to Germany, I had no INS, no Tactical Air Navigation (TACAN), there were no VORs and NDBs were scarce. Halfway across the Atlantic, Ross lost his INS. How did we make it? Communication! We were constantly talking back and forth, giving headings and altitude along with prop, power, and airspeed settings. We discussed what we thought the winds were doing. We used our E6B! Remember those? If anyone has forgotten, please remember! It turned out to be the most useful piece of equipment on the trip. It was very gratifying to see that after four hours in the clouds we could see each other when we broke out. Effective communications, good dead reckoning skills, and a little luck kept us on course with adequate separation.

Effective aircrew coordination is essential. It doesn't matter if the other person is a pilot or not. It doesn't even matter if he is in your aircraft. As pilots we sometimes let our egos get the best of us. Sometimes we're afraid to admit a mistake or question an unsafe decision. If this ferry flight taught me one thing, it taught me to question anything that didn't seem right. Discuss what you're doing and be open to constructive criticism. You will be a safer, more proficient, and knowledgeable pilot if you do.

We tend to get lazy always flying in the same area. We know what ATC is going to say before they say it. My advice is don't let ATC give you a false sense of security. Be aware of what's going on around you at all times.

The flight from Bombay, India to Bangkok was extremely long. We refueled in Calcutta and after a two hour immigration delay we were on our way to Thailand. This was another long, overwater flight at night and in clouds. Ross and I were both tired. He was the lead aircraft. Again, neither of us had any navigation equipment. His VHF had limited range so when we got into the Bangkok Flight Information Region (FIR), I made the radio calls. About 50 miles out of Bangkok, we were in radar contact and outside of the clouds. We decided separate approach clearances were in order since a night formation instrument approach and landing was unsafe.

I contacted Bangkok Approach and passed our intentions. My call sign was Army 256, while Ross was Army 269. Approach acknowledged our request and I informed them Army 269 was the lead aircraft. Approach then contacted Army 269 and gave him a descent to 4,000. They also gave him a squawk, which was the same as mine. Ross had Approach confirm the squawk and again reminded them that we wanted separate clearances. Approach acknowledged. I was still at 7,000, my last assigned altitude. It just didn't seem right, two airplanes 3,000 feet apart with the same transponder code. I soon started thinking that approach thought we were both at 4,000 shooting a formation approach. That became apparent when I heard Approach give a heavy Air Bus a heading of 140° and a descent clearance from 10,000 to 5,000. This clearance would take the Air Bus through my flight path. I called Approach to confirm separate clearances and remind them I was at 7,000. Everything was quickly cleared up and we received a separate landing clearance. The point is, question what doesn't seem right. If it still doesn't seem right, question it again. It's better to face a little embarrassment on the radio than be the first one at the scene of your accident. We all make

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demand conformance and risk-aversion and practice centralized leadership. We place great pressures on commanders at all levels to perform to standard in major training events, and there aren't many incentives to depart from the plan and take a chance on something new and different. We don't see many reverse slope defenses. We don't often see commanders deliberately allow penetrations in order to encircle and destroy the advancing OPFOR. And we certainly don't see juniors participating in pre-mission planning and offering suggestions and input to the colonel, although this is commonplace in some other armies.

It is easy to talk about commander's intent, mission orders and decentralization as a method of command, but under the extreme pressures found in the unit environment it can be awfully difficult to do. Giving someone the freedom to fail sounds great up until the time they actually do and it is a near certainty that, sooner or later, someone will. That's why I believe maneuver warfare requires tremendous strength of character.

Some people confuse character with being tough and demanding. Too often these are code words for "harsh and temperamental". Juniors deserve respect and support in their honest attempts to learn their profession, not harassment and impatience from their superiors. In units which operate this way, innovation and initiative which represents an attempt to further the commander's intent is considered praiseworthy, whether successful or not. That's exactly what training is for—to learn from our mistakes so that in combat we can get it right. Criticism is reserved for those who cannot or will not make a decision in a timely manner and act on it.

In this decade, budget realities and a vastly different strategic environment will place extreme pressures on the services. As Colonel William Darryl Henderson argues in a recent book, we might not be able to squeeze much more performance out of the force without changing some of the rules. The time is right to take a hard look at ways to improve—significantly improve—the capabilities of those forces which will survive the deep cuts which now appear inevitable. Maneuver warfare is one such possibility. I hope it will receive our serious consideration and reflection as we look at the defining challenges, and opportunities, which await us in the coming century. IIIII

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mistakes, but what's important is that we all learn from them.

These tales have been shared not to receive any pats on the back or brag about what great pilots we are. The purpose is to present a few situations we found ourselves in so all aviators can apply them to situations they may one day face. No one is perfect. Those who pretend they are usually are the first to discover they are not. Additionally, I hope anyone with an opportunity such as ours now has some insight as to what goes into conducting an international flight. Don't misinterpret what I am saying. Though plagued with hassles, this

journey was an experience of a lifetime. Through gale force winds in Canada to Miss Iceland in Keflavik through two tons of ice in Greenland to the exotic beaches in Crete; through the heat and hassles of the Middle East, to the decadence of Thailand, we did find time to relax and enjoy.

Now the journey is over! We are back at A Co, 3d MI Bn (AE) Korea. The ferry flight is already a blur for Ross and I as the unit wasted no time getting us back on those middle-of-the-night flights in support of the Peacetime Aerial Reconnaissance Program (PARPRO). Mohawk pilots are a rare but proud breed. I'm thankful to be part of such a unique family. IIIII