



Emergency in the Talon!

By Maj. CORY "OGRE" CHRISTOFFER
Photo by Tech. Sgt. MATTHEW HANNEN

Nearly every Air Force pilot, having gone through undergraduate pilot training, would probably agree that the emergency procedures "stand up" was the most dreadful aspect of the 4:30 a.m. formal brief. I remember being a student in class 00-06 at Laughlin Air Force Base, Texas, waiting for the stand up portion to start ... palms sweating, heart beating, checklist and in-flight guide open. I remember hoping that if I was called upon to handle a simulated aircraft emergency, that it would be one that I had reviewed and studied, knew the indications, where it was located in the checklist, and how to recover the jet appropriately.

Every student knew that "hooking" a stand up meant that you failed in front of your peers, classmates and instructors. You didn't want to be that guy. More often than not, it meant you were taken off the flying schedule to study the appropriate way to handle the "emergency."

Of course, there's always a purpose to the madness.

Last February I found myself in a T-38C Talon in the east military operating area at Randolph AFB, Texas, work-

ing a real-world, complex emergency as an instructor pilot.

The aircraft emergency, albeit not complicated itself, happened at a time of deteriorating weather, with a wingman short on fuel, and with a constant flow of traffic recovering to the same runway.

While in the airspace in tactical formation and at 20,000 feet, I experienced a rapid decompression of the front cockpit. I took control of the aircraft from my student in the rear cockpit and descended

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below 10,000 feet, while simultaneously accomplishing other checklist items. I then requested



With bad weather surrounding them, a T-38 instructor pilot and his student experienced a rapid decompression in the cockpit and had to make an emergency landing.

the lead in the airspace and worked a plan to bring myself and my wingman back to base as safely and expeditiously as possible.

The weather at Randolph was at minimums, and the top of the clouds began at 8,000 feet. Landing fuel was higher than normal because of an alternate requirement that was a significant distance from Randolph. I kept my wingman with me until we got to radar downwind, accomplished all checklist items required, told the supervisor of flying my intentions, and made the squadron supervisor aware of the plan.

The “stand up” emergency, if you will, was going just fine and as advertised. There were no physiological symptoms

with me or my student. We were in line for the approach and had the gas for one approach and landing before we went below divert fuel.

It was raining significantly. The runway was wet, but the ceiling and visibility were above minimums.

On the way back to base I remember thinking I had fuel to divert. However, if my gas were to go below divert gas, I would be unable to emergency divert because I did not have any cabin pressure and did not want to climb above flight level 250; the emergency divert required a climb above flight level 300. So, basically, I had one shot at the approach, and then I would have to make a decision to divert or try the approach again.

To sum it up, I was on a 10-mile final in poor weather with an in-flight emergency. I was at my limit for divert fuel, and my wingman was behind me 10 miles awaiting his turn to land.

That’s when I heard something that forced my decision-making process to speed up significantly.

As soon as I broke out of the weather just below 300 feet above ground level, in the rain and mist, I heard that the aircraft in front of me had blown a tire on the runway.

Thirteen years ago as a second lieutenant I did not have the experience to make a decision like the one I had to make at this point. I had to make a decision to either land with another jet on the wet runway, to go around and divert to the alternate, or to go around and back in the weather for an approach to the other available runway at Randolph.

As a previously declared emergency aircraft, tower told me I could land on the opposite side of the runway as the disabled jet with a blown tire. However, I looked up and down the runway and could not see the end of the runway or the other jet because of the limited visibility.

I decided to pass on that option.

Instead, I elected to take myself and my wingman around to 14R, the other runway at Randolph, which had different approach frequencies yet similar minimums. I had the fuel to do another approach at Randolph but not to divert below flight level 250.

After talking with my student, my wingman and the supervisor of flying, they all concurred with my plan to do the approach to 14R, hoping at this point that the deteriorating weather did not get any worse. There had not been a pilot report on 14R, but we all felt confident that the weather was at least at a 200-foot ceiling and one-half mile visibility.

I coordinated quickly for the approach

to the other runway for myself and my wingman, continued to state that I was an emergency, which at this time included emergency fuel for me and my wingman, reviewed the approach for 14R, and began to receive vectors. Radar approach control and tower did an excellent job giving us priority among other aircraft with more fuel and more of a capability to hold.

The 14R weather was 200 feet; visibility was three-quarters of a mile, and the runway was wet. Nonetheless, landing was uneventful for both of us in the rain and the mist, and we all made it to the squadron safely. We had to take a trip to the flight surgeon because of the rapid decompression, and were not allowed to fly for 24 hours.

Rapid decompression at 20,000 feet, vectored to weather minimums at divert fuel, sudden runway closure after breaking out, going below normal divert fuel, getting vectored to minimums again to a different runway, and landing with emergency fuel ... that is quite the “stand up” emergency! Because of experience, using crew resource management and, together, making timely decisions, this emergency was resolved safely. We stayed on the flying schedule to train another day. ✈

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Maj. Cory “Ogre” Christoffer was glad to have his “stand up” emergency training when he experienced an in-flight emergency in the T-38 and had to land in bad weather, low on fuel at an alternate runway.

by Tech. Sgt. Samuel Bender