



Out of Gas at 9,000 feet and Lost in the Bahamas

By

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It started out to be a routine patrol from Coast Guard Air Station St. Petersburg Florida. The trip home took a very unexpected turn as we were diverted to look for a Cessna 180 that was running out of gas and lost in the Bahamas! I'm Greg King and I was an AD2 scanner/drop master on the C-130 "1414". My friend Rick Brenden was the second scanner/ drop in the back of the aircraft.

We took off from St. Pete/ Clearwater airport, made a cargo stop at CGAS Miami and flew Southwest toward Nassau. Leaving Nassau with the cargo we picked up, we went in search of a navigational buoy that NOAA (National Oceanic and Aeronautical Administration) feared might have broken loose from its anchor after being severely thrashed about by Hurricane Dorothy. Dorothy formed from a tropical wave located halfway between Bermuda and the central Bahamas. The storm moved northeastward, brushing Bermuda to the south and gradually strengthened. On September 28 [1977] Dorothy became a hurricane northeast of Bermuda, and her fury was felt even to the southwest throughout the Caribbean. Our trusty Lockheed descended to about 100 feet as we flew over the NOAA buoy, still securely moored to her anchor. We radioed our report back to COMSTATION Miami and headed for Puerto Rico.

We landed in Puerto Rico, made a cargo exchange and just at dusk we lifted off the runway headed home for St. Petersburg. The after take-off checklist was

completed and we activated our IFR flight plan with Miami Center and were cleared for Flight Level "Two Niner Zero."

Just north of the Dominican Republic our radioman came over the intercom, "Pilot – Radio! RCC (Rescue Coordination Center) just picked up a MAYDAY from a Cessna. Said he's almost out of gas, and has no idea where he's at!" The co-pilot called the Cessna. The man said he'd departed from Miami enroute to Grand Turk Island, but had apparently miscalculated his navigation heading, and totally missed the island. It was dark and he said his fuel gage was on "Empty" and he expected his engine to die any time, and had no idea where he was.

The pilot tuned in to the Cessna's radio frequency and asked him to do an up-down count to 10 so we could get a directional fix on his location. "1-2-3 ... 10-9-8." "OK, we have a fix on your location. What is your altitude?" The lost pilot responded, "I'm at 9,000 feet." We descended to 10,000 and made our way to his location. Within 10 minutes we flew over the top of the Cessna and began to orbit overhead. The co-pilot and navigator began searching for the closest land, and hopefully a runway. The best chance he had was to head directly for a dirt strip on the end of a peninsula to the East of Nagua on the Dominican Republic.

The Cessna pilot seemed extremely calm considering the predicament he was in. He was glad that the Coast Guard was there by his side, but knew that his chances of landing in the dark, shark-infested sea were pretty high! He said that he'd leaned out his engine as much as he could, and throttled back and would just wait to see what happened.

We began reading him instruction for water ditching procedures. He realized that since his Cessna 180 had non-retractable gear that he would more than likely flip inverted once his gear hit the water. We reassured him that as soon as he was in the water, we would fly over and drop a raft and survival equipment to him. Ten minutes, turned to fifteen, then twenty. "Guys, I don't know how this thing is still

flying! My gage shows that I ran out of gas about fifteen minutes ago. Somebody up there must like me!" "I'm going to shut off my lights and all my electrical equipment to try to save as much gas as I can... I'll be back in a few minutes."

The radioman reached a station in the Dominican and explained the situation. There were no landing lights on the little dirt strip, so even if he made it, he'd be literally trying to land in the dark on a runway he couldn't see. Some residents of the small village were rallied to drive to the runway and line up on either side with their head lights on. At least the guy would now have some idea where to land.

Miraculously we arrived overhead of the airstrip and the Cessna was still flying. We told him he was over the runway and the rest would be up to him. "Guys, I don't know how to thank you enough! Instead of attempting a straight in approach, I think I'll do a spiral descent and try to make it." The Cessna dipped the left wing and just at that moment the engine quit. He was out of gas at 9,000 feet and would have to glide in for a landing.

The experienced pilot descended and once safely on the ground he responded with another warm "Thank you!" "You guys saved my life!"

I don't know what kind of reception he received once on the ground, but we suspect he may have spent the night in a jail, but at least it wasn't the sea! We said good bye, and wished him luck and headed for home. Just another day in the life of Coast Guard Aviation!

