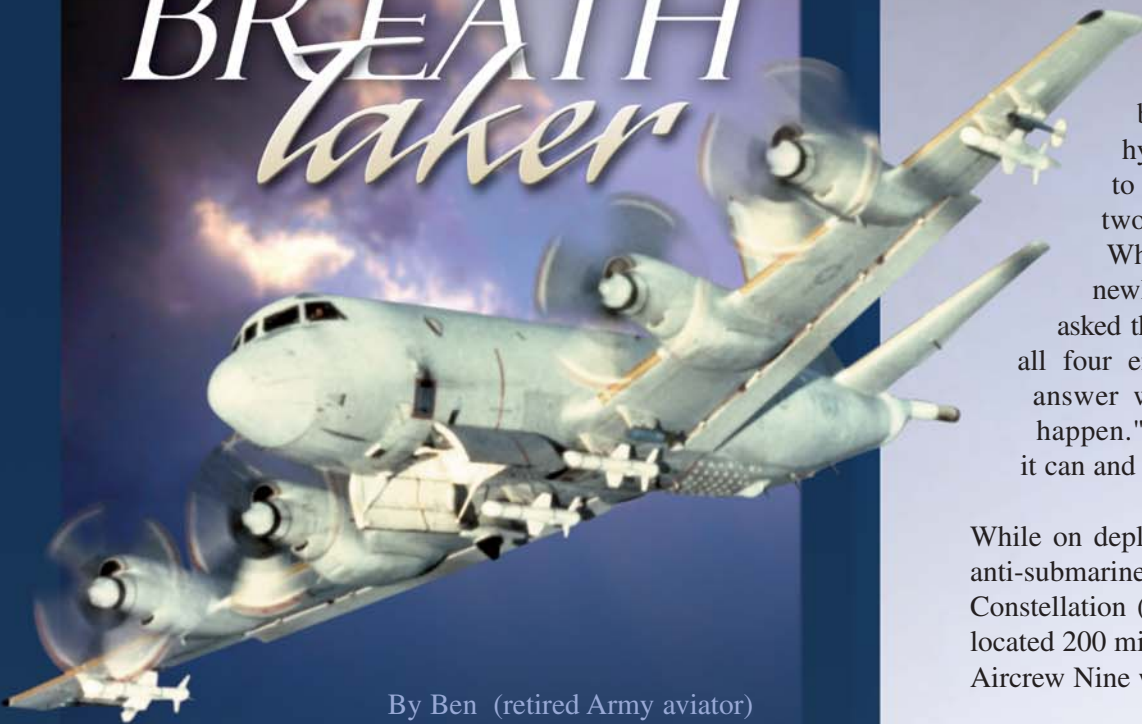


BREATH *taker*



By Ben (retired Army aviator)

“The P-3 Orion is a four jet turboprop aircraft made by Lockheed for the Navy, beginning in the early 1960s. It is named Orion after the mythical hunter of the same name. The Orion could remain aloft for up to 19 hours without refueling. We normally carried three pilots, who exchanged seats every four hours.”

I know how these guys felt, as an old P-3 Pilot, I know how she flies boost out. On a mission over the South China Sea, I had to fly one boost out after the failure of a hydraulic fitting and the crew tried to get some fluid from the number two to the number two system. While going through the P-3 FRS, newly winged aviators have always asked the question, "Has a P-3 ever lost all four engines at the same time." The answer was always, "No, it will never happen." Well, as Murphy's Law applies, it can and we did.

While on deployment and after performing an anti-submarine warfare mission with the USS Constellation (CV-64) battle group, which was located 200 miles east of Oman, VP-47 Combat Aircrew Nine was returning to Masirah, Oman.

The flight station crew was composed of LCDR Mark Radice, a lieutenant commander and a former P-3 FRS instructor who had just checked into the squadron 19 days earlier for his second tour; AE 1 Richard White, the flight engineer; and me, a senior lieutenant in the squadron with about 273 aircraft commander hours.

Little did we know that we were about to experience the beginning of what would eventually be one of the worst P-3 mishaps ever. We had just restarted the number one engine, which was loitered on station to conserve fuel, and climbed up to an altitude of 16,000 feet for our transit home.

At about 130 miles east of the island of Masirah, Oman, the flight engineer noticed that the number one prop pump warning light on the number four engine was illuminated. I directed the flight engineer to increase the number four power lever, which was the first step of our emergency procedure, and it also ensured that we had a good blade angle.

We then pulled out our NATOPS flight manual, commonly referred to as the "Big Blue Sleeping Pill," and read through the remaining steps of our procedure. Having a prop pump

light in it's self was not a big worry, but it could eventually lead to bigger problems. Approaching 80 miles east of Masirah, the situation worsened. The second prop pump light on the number four engine illuminated and the prop began to over speed. The crew went through the over speed procedures, and we determined that the prop was pitch locked. This malfunction does not occur on a regular basis in the P-3 Orion, so needless to say, the flight crew's concern and heart rate increased as to what would happen to the prop when we fuel chopped the engine during our descent to land. We flew back to the airfield at 16,000 feet and executed a slow, spiraling descent to maintain our number four engines rpm at 100 percent. Not knowing what would happen when we fuel chopped the number four engine, the flight station went through the descent, approach and three engine landing considerations checklists.

Approaching 6,000 feet and nearing the engine's limit power setting, we decided to circle the field one last time, extend out for a good downwind leg and fuel chop the engine in anticipation for our landing. Unfortunately, we would not get to land at that airfield.

Passing 5,600 feet, we heard and felt a tremendous explosion. My co-pilot, who was in the right seat, looked out and saw a huge cloud of black smoke. To his utter dismay, when the smoke cleared, he saw the number four prop missing and the reduction gear box on fire.

LCDR Radice called out to shut down the number four engine and discharge the fire extinguisher. I was in the left seat, so I was unable to see what was going on. Trusting his judgment, I concurred with the decision to shut the engine down. The flight engineer shut down the engine and discharged the fire extinguisher. LCDR Radice looked out at the engine and the fire was still raging. AE1 White then discharged the second fire bottle. Unfortunately, the fire kept burning. AE 1 White then called out that the number three engine's rpm was winding down. LCDR Radice looked out at the number three prop and called out that the prop looked bad too.

It made sense that during the explosion, the number four engine probably took out the number three engine. We then called out to shut down the number three engine. While the flight engineer was pulling the number three emergency shutdown handle, I simultaneously advanced the number one and number two engine power levers.

Expecting to hear or feel a pitch change in the prop and not getting one, you can imagine my reaction when I looked out and saw both props barely rotating.



Cockpit of a P-3C, which was considerably modernized compared to older variants. Picture taken by Commander J. David Rogers, USN.

Upon seeing this, I looked back inside the flight station to let the rest of the crew in on the secret, but AE1 White beat me to it and called flameout on number one and two engines.

All of the sudden the flight station went dark due to a total electrical power loss. Shaking my head with dismay saying, "You've got to be kidding me," we directed AEI White to pull the hydraulic boost handles and start the auxiliary power unit in order to get electrical power back. At this time we were gust locked, which is the same as when your car's steering column locks up and you can't move it. To say the least, it was not a good feeling.

After the boost handles were pulled, the flight engineer made several attempts to start the APU, but it kept flaming out. At this point things were really looking bad for VP-47's crew. When the boost handles were pulled, the aircraft should have switched from a hydraulic to a mechanical advantage. For some reason, this didn't occur and we were unable to control the aircraft. The aircraft rolled right into a 45-50 degree angle of bank and our airspeed bled off from 260 to 210 knots.

On the flight station we thought that the aircraft was going to stall and roll inverted. What a horrible gut wrenching feeling it was to think that this was going to be the end for everyone. I was their aircraft commander and I as responsible for their well-being. I could not get control of the aircraft and we did not have time to put on our parachutes to bail out.

Even if we would have had time to don our parachutes, the main cabin door was facing the sky, which made bailing out

impossible. Up to this point, the entire evolution from engine explosion had taken about 45 seconds. With my heart pounding from being afraid and wanting to save the rest of the crew, I said a quick prayer. My prayers were answered.

The control column went boost out and unlocked. Finally at about 2,500 feet, we were able to control the aircraft. We leveled the wings, then continued in a left hand turn to acquire the airfield.

When I saw the airfield 90 degrees off of our left wing, we were at 2,000 feet and 6-7 miles away from land. A harsh reality set in - we were going to have to ditch the aircraft. Having never heard of or seen NATOPS procedures for a no engine, no-flap, boost-out ditch, we had to rely on gut instinct. We knew that if we flew too fast, it would be hard to pull the nose up upon water entry. If we flew too slow, the aircraft would stall soon after leveling off above the water.

We maintained our airspeed between 175-180 knots, which gave us a 1,000 fpm rate of descent. At this time, as with all life threatening situations, each crew member's adrenaline system kicked in to high gear. Fortunately, I had a great set of parents and a high school football coach who was a former Oakland Raider all-pro football player who taught me to never quit and find ways to win.

At about 1,200 feet, we told the rest of the crew to prepare for immediate ditching. At 200 feet approaching water entry, both LCDR Radice and I started pulling back on the yoke. The nose came up nicely.

The two biggest items necessary to perform a successful ditch is to maintain level wings and have a shallow rate of descent. At first, we were able to keep our wings level and get our rate of descent to about 300 feet per minute. At 80 feet, the right wing started rolling as we slowed down.

LCDR Radice recognized the problem, called for left full yoke and the right wing came back up. Upon water entry, we were wings level, had a 200 feet per minute rate of descent and were right at 135 knots. After several skips across the water and fighting to keep the nose of the aircraft up, the plane finally came to rest.

A P-3 ditch can best be described as being similar to a log ride at an amusement park, but with more of a kick in the pants.

The amazement of still being alive with the Orion still afloat caught me off guard, but there was little time for celebration. The water traversed through the tube of the aircraft and shot into the flight station like someone pointing a fire hose at us. My co-pilot and flight engineer evacuated the aircraft through the overhead escape hatch. I evacuated the aircraft through the side escape hatch located immediately behind the pilot seat on the left side.

After jumping into the water, I soon realized that the plane was still drifting like a boat does without power.

To my chagrin, the number two prop was coming right for me and was going to plow right over me. All that I could do was paddle backwards as fast as I could to avoid the prop, putting my hands on the prop to push me out of its way. Fortunately, the aircraft came to a stop and I was able to swim to the

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Deployment of a Mk 13 smoke flare to aid the helicopter in finding the crew. United States Navy photos .

leading edge of the wing between the number one and number two engines.

I called out to LCDR Radice to see if the whole crew made it out of the aircraft. I was covered from head to toe with aircraft fuel and my eyes felt as if they were on fire. My flight gloves were slippery from the fuel and this made it difficult to climb on top of the wing. After three tries, I finally succeeded and reached the TACCO and in-flight technician.

The rest of the crew evacuated out the starboard side escape hatch and entered their life rafts. My in-flight technician was pulling the ring to inflate the life raft, but the blasted thing would not inflate.

A pilot friend of mine and his crew were waiting to take off to pick up an admiral in Bahrain when we hit the water. Shortly after we got into the life rafts, my buddy flew over and the crew let out a big yell. Once things finally settled down, the crew looked each other over and checked for injuries.

To my surprise, not a single crew member was injured. The only person with a problem was me.

Up to this point I had controlled my temper quite well, but this was too much. After a few choice words directed to the life raft, the only option left was to inflate our life vests and swim around to the other side.

Realizing our predicament, the crew in the other life rafts began to paddle around the rear of the aircraft in order to meet us. The three of us joined the other crew members and climbed into the rafts. I had fuel in my eyes and they were burning like crazy. My sensor one operator carried a little water bottle in his life vest. He pulled out the water bottle and began to pour it in my eyes to flush out the fuel.

While he was taking care of me, my TACCO and second pilot were trying to contact the other P-3 crew on our PRC-90 radios to let them know of our status.

This day was true to form, because my TACCO went through three radios before he found one that worked. On the fourth radio, he was finally able to talk to the other crew to let them know that we were fine.

We were in the rafts for only 10 minutes before the SAR helicopter arrived. The rescue was uneventful. The helicopter took seven crew members on the first trip and four crew members on the second.



A successful “pick” of an air crewman by a Navy CH-46 chopper. Crewmen routinely carry 37 pounds of flight gear. Info provided by Commander J. David Rogers, USN. Photo by USN.

A month later, a barge and crane raised the aircraft and we discovered that the number four prop had thrown a blade. The imbalance of only three blades caused the engine to explode. The prop blade was thrown from right to left and cut through the body of the aircraft, severing 35 of 44 engine and flight control cables. Four of the cables cut went to the four engines. The cutting action caused a pulling action which shut down all four engine simultaneously. The hydraulic boost handle cables were cut and the APU fuel line was cut. The nine intact cables were two aileron cables, two elevator cables, two elevator trim tab cables and two rudder trim tab cables. The co-pilot's main flight control cable was also cut.

VP-47's crew nine flew under a lucky cloud that day. For so many things to go wrong and everything to work out perfectly was a total surprise to me. I have never questioned the reason we were spared, but I am glad that we were.

First things first! But not necessarily in that order....and..