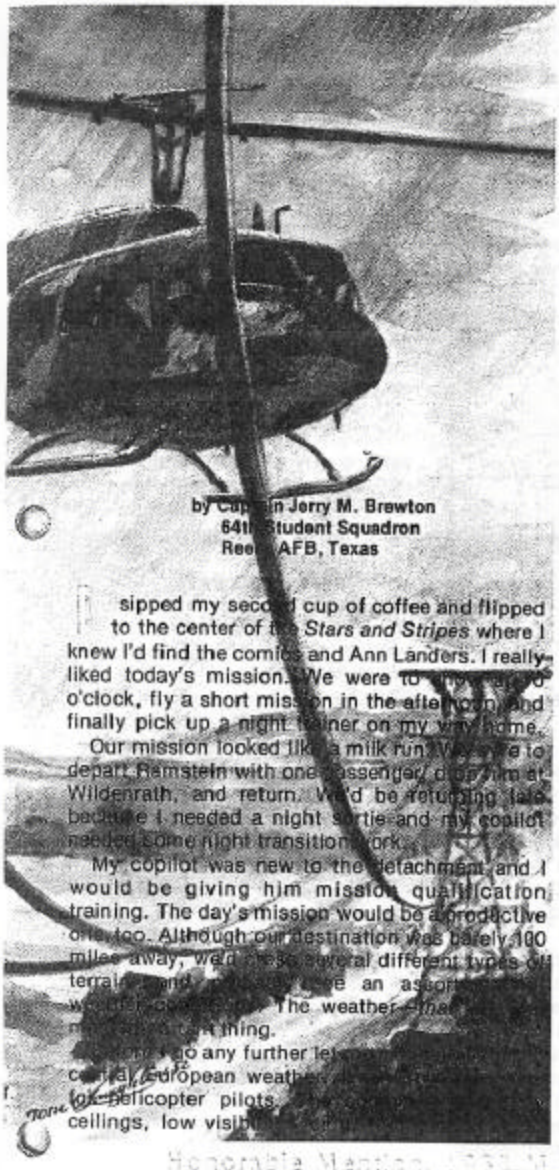
Bad Habits — Not Tricks of the Trade

A helicopter IP learns a lesson in instruction.



by Captain Jerry M. Brewton
64th Student Squadron
Reese AFB, Texas

I sipped my second cup of coffee and flipped to the center of the *Stars and Stripes* where I knew I'd find the comics and Ann Landers. I really liked today's mission. We were to [illegible] o'clock, fly a short mission in the afternoon, and finally pick up a night trainer on my way home.

Our mission looked like a milk run. We were to depart Ramstein with one passenger, drop him at Wildenrath, and return. We'd be returning late because I needed a night sortie and my copilot needed some night transition work.

My copilot was new to the detachment, and I would be giving him mission qualification training. The day's mission would be a productive one, too. Although our destination was barely 100 miles away, we'd cross several different types of terrain and [illegible] an assortment of weather conditions. The weather [illegible] right thing.

[illegible] to any further let[illegible] central European weather [illegible] for helicopter pilots. [illegible] ceilings, low visibi[illegible] freezing drizzle, and thick haze make the flying downright treacherous. The only thing I haven't seen on a German weather sheet is blowing dust. To make matters worse, the weather changes rapidly. Anyway, when I arrived at the detachment Lieutenant Jones was waiting.

"Morning sir, think we'll be able to get off today?"

"Don't call me 'sir,' it makes me feel old," I scolded the kid teasingly. "Let's check the weather."

The weather forecast didn't look too bad. Ramstein was 800 feet and 3 miles and Wildenrath was 2,000 feet and 5 miles plus. There were isolated thunderstorms and occasional rain showers with gusty surface winds. I figured this was a good time to show him one of the tricks of the trade I'd learned in my 2 years at Ramstein. I turned to the weather forecaster. "Hey, Joe, what's the current observation out of Hahn?" While waiting for the latest weather report, I explained my reasoning. "Hahn is about 800 feet higher than Ramstein. It's also right along our route. If they're down, we'll reroute our flight across some lower terrain."

"Hahn is presently 500 feet and 2 miles. They've got an intermittent 300 feet and 1 mile on their forecast."

"That's not too good," I reasoned, "but it's good enough to give it a try. Let's go file our flight plan."

Before leaving base ops I made sure that we checked the notams for all the airfields along our route of flight. I explained to Jones that if we needed to land at one of those places, having the current notam information could come in handy. He seemed impressed by my caution. It was just another trick of the trade that had come in handy in the past. As I filed I noticed Jones checking the Rhine valley on the terrain chart and comparing it with a line he had drawn on a strip map. I thought back a couple of years to the time when I, too, had made strip maps. But just as I'd learned to do without them, I knew Lieutenant

Honorable Mention, 1982 [illegible]

Jones would learn also, especially if I could teach him a few tricks which made strip maps unnecessary. Upon reaching the helipad, we found our helicopter was ready so we completed a quick preflight. Our passenger was right on time and we were airborne at 1330. Fifteen minutes after that, the weather began to deteriorate.

"I was afraid of this," I said. "Hahn's weather is never as good as forecast. The enroute supplement even has a warning about that." We still had good VFR conditions but the hilltops ahead of us were in the clouds. "Put Pferdsfeld in the tacan and tune Pferdsfeld tower on UHF, copilot. Looks like we'll have to do a little diverting." While Jones was following my instructions I explained what I was doing. "Pferdsfeld is east of Hahn. It's also lower. There's a valley about 6 miles south of the field, and if we can get there, it'll take us out to the Rhine valley. From there we'll have a much higher ceiling to work with."

We found the valley but it didn't help. I thought about turning back for Ramstein, but I knew if we could work our way down out of the hills we'd be okay. I wanted to show Jones how to cope with the low ceilings. (Looking back on it, all I wanted to do was to show him I knew all of the tricks.)

I called Pferdsfeld tower and requested a special VFR clearance to transit the control zone. Tower advised us that the ceiling was down to 200-feet and visibility was 2,000-meters with light rain. Not much for VFR, but with thunderstorms on the forecast we didn't have an IFR option. Also, the valley we were in had narrowed to a point we didn't have enough room to turn safely. Luck was with us, though, and up ahead I could see the valley widening and the terrain dropping off sharply. In a couple of minutes we were looking at a 5,000-foot ceiling and 5 miles visibility. "Sometimes things get a little tight when you're sneaking down the valleys," I said.

We turned out of the valley and headed for Wildenrath. I decided to show Jones a few more tricks which he would find useful in the years ahead. "We're coming into a high traffic area. There's always lots of low-level, fast moving aircraft around here. The safest thing for us to do is get radar coverage from the military controllers. They'll tell us where every target is located. They'll also provide traffic separation and vectors if we request it."

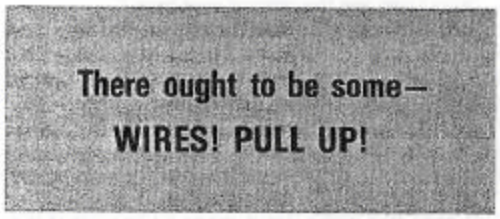
"Sounds like a good idea." Jones said. "Who do we call?"

"Clutch radar," I said. "They're in the book."

Clutch radar vectored us around all the traffic and the flight into Wildenrath was like a Sunday drive. In spite of the low ceilings and valley flying, we got our passenger there only 5 minutes past his scheduled arrival time. We'd planned to stay on the ground at Wildenrath until just before sundown so we could get the max amount of night time while flying home, but I decided to check the weather and make sure that was still a good idea. We could always fly back to Ramstein, land, and takeoff again after it got dark. When we arrived at the weather shop, the forecaster did not have good news.

"Hahn radar is reporting a line of thunderstorms extending from Hahn northeast to Mendig. Quite a few rain showers and some low stratus in the hills."

"Well Jones, we won't go back the same way we came up. Maybe we can go around to the west." I tried to figure a route that would keep us well away from the bad weather. "Could you get me a forecast for Bitburg and Spangdahlem?" I asked.



We soon had a forecast for our new routing, and it was better than 1,000 feet and 3 miles all the way. There was a chance of some scattered stratus around 500 feet, however. In less than an hour we were on our way back to Ramstein.

"Wish we had weather radar," Jones said. "Those clouds look pretty dark." And so they did. It looked as if a line of thunderstorms had developed in front of us. Time for another trick. I then explained that the surveillance radar at Norvenich had given me weather advisories on many previous occasions. We gave them a call. They were helpful, but not encouraging.

"You've got some heavy buildups about 20 miles directly in front of you," the controller informed. "By the way, did you know that your transponder is inoperative?"

"Can we go west toward Bitburg?"

"I'm not painting anything in that direction at the present time. These cells have been building all around, though."

So, we headed toward Bitburg and for a while it looked good. Then things began to go wrong. First, the scattered stratus turned out to be at about 100 feet instead of 500. Next, we encountered moderate rain that cut our visibility to less than a mile. Navigation became next to

impossible and we had to descend so low that we broke lock on Bitburg tacan. I decided to reverse course and return to Norvenich until things got better, but I'd waited too long. Down below there was nothing but trees which ruled out the landing option. Then I saw it—a sucker hole. An opening through which I could see some blue.

"Going up," I said as I pulled the collective. This was one of Captain Carson's old tricks. "If you don't like what you see on bottoms, try the top," he'd told me. At 4,000 feet we were above most of the stratus. Visibility was good, but that was all. A few miles to our left was a wall of clouds that towered thousands of feet above the stratus layer. Thunderstorms! Ahead and to our right others were building. We had to get down and fast. I checked my tacan. Buschel was too far to the left and there was probably a thunderstorm in progress. The Spangdahlem tacan also was out. Bitburg was 18 miles in front of and slightly right of our nose. Jones came to the rescue.

"Hey I can see the ground over here."

The hole wasn't nearly as big as the one that we'd climbed up through. In fact it wasn't much more than a thin spot in the clouds. "Going down," I said. Bottom the collective, crack the throttles, kick right pedal, and you'll fall like a brick. We did. We broke out under the same low stratus we'd had before. But again we were lucky. "There's a railroad." Jones pointed.

"Looks like we've got it made." I knew that the railroad was in a valley and the valley would take us right to Bitburg. "Sometimes you have to get pretty low, but as you can see we've got plenty of room to maneuver and the visibility is not bad at all. Also it's easy to find checkpoints as long as you stay oriented. Look, right here is a railroad bridge and a little farther up ahead there ought to be some—WIRES! PULL UP! The engineer hadn't even keyed the intercom. But we heard him—loud and clear!

I pulled back for all I was worth and we barely cleared the power lines. I was sure they'd hook the skids when they passed the chin bubble. We spent the next few miles nervously looking outside for more wires until we landed at Bitburg.

"We're finished for the day! I'll debrief this back at Ramstein," I told Jones as we left the helicopter pad and headed for the BOQ. And it would be a long debriefing. After a few more missions Jones would realize just how dumb some of the things I'd done were. The very same things I thought were dumb when I was a new copilot. But I'd seen someone else do them. They'd taught me all the tricks. Some of them were good, like knowing who to call for radar service, or how to get the best weather information. The importance of checking enroute notams and even how to work your way down a valley or use a suckerhole *if you have to* were good to know. But they used these tricks as routine and I was following right along. If I didn't change, Jones and all the other new guys would follow in my footsteps. I was teaching Jones to do dangerous things.

Tomorrow would be different. There would be no more taking chances. No more calling safety violations "tricks of the trade." Tomorrow we'd spend a lot of time talking about what we shouldn't have done today. Overhead I could see a star behind the broken cloud deck. Maybe we should have pressed on home tonight I thought. Then I turned and looked toward Ramstein. Lightning!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

A native of Texas, Captain Brewton graduated from the University of Houston in 1970 completing OTS the same year. An IP with over 2,000 hours of light lift time, Captain Brewton has flown HH-43s, UH-1Fs, and HH-1Hs. Prior to his assignment as a fixed-wing student pilot at Reese AFB, he was a member of Detachment 2, 67 ARRS at Ramstein AB, Germany. Captain Brewton was a first place winner in 1980 and received an Honorable Mention in 1976, 1979, and 1981 writing contests.