

Night Frìght



by Lt. Frank Rhodes

Our squadron was just starting COMP-TUEX during my nugget workup cycle. We'd finished TSTA a week earlier. After some great liberty in Canada, a day of flying, and more liberty in San Diego, I was refreshed and ready for two more weeks of cyclic ops.

Four days later, I was scheduled for my first night trap since the transit to San Diego. After an uneventful OCA mission as Dash 2, my flight lead and I returned to marshal and split up for the standard SOCAL penetration into a 1,000-foot-overcast, night, Case III approach.

The first part of the CV-1 went without a hitch. I was feeling a little behind the jet, because I had not flown much recently. This fact should have

caused the hair on the back of my neck to stand up, but it didn't. I leveled off at angels 1.2. My radar altimeter was set to 450 feet, and I had needles (ACLS) selected in the HUD (only the needles). I had found that the combination of bullseye and needles cluttered the HUD too much. When I heard the controller say, "Four Zero Four, ACLS lock-on, call your needles" and I actually had needles in my HUD, I breathed a sigh of relief. Unfortunately, I didn't bother to cross-check the TACAN and didn't hear the controller call my lock on range as four miles. I was at seven miles.

I entered the marine layer between 1,500 and 1,000 feet. I focused on my needles and flew one of my best ACLS approaches. Nearing 500 feet, I scanned outside to where I expected the ship



Photo-composite by Pat Eaton



should be. The sight picture was completely foreign to me. I saw two sets of lights. The first was a pair of red lights at about one mile, where I thought the ship should be. The latter was in a configuration I couldn't quite make out, two miles farther away. Neither of these lights looked anything like the carrier. It didn't occur to me to cross-check the TACAN. The radar altimeter went off at 450 feet, and the controller told me to call the ball. I answered back with a confused, "Clara."

Meanwhile, back in CATCC, a supervisor noticed two controllers had simultaneously told two different aircraft to call the ball. The supervisor heard "Two Zero Three, Hornet, ball" and "Four Zero Four, clara." It took the supervisor a couple

seconds to realize that 404 was actually at one and a half miles, but when he did, he broadcast, "Four Zero Four, fly bullseye."

On the platform, the controlling LSO noticed a Hornet flying extremely right of centerline, seemingly shooting the approach to the plane guard. Not knowing what channel the pilot was monitoring, he quickly switched between the two frequencies transmitting an emphatic, "At a mile, you're low—climb!"

I was looking at a sight picture that was just plain bad. I went to military power a second before the controlling LSO and supervisor in CATCC made their calls. I selected ILS as soon as my velocity vector was above the horizon. It was the scariest fly-up, fly-left I could have imagined. CAG Paddles, who had taken over by this time, did an incredible job talking me back to glideslope and centerline. I settled down enough to trap on the 4-wire. With a lot of questions and shaking knees, I taxied out of the landing area.

I figure I had shallowed out my rate of descent at the ball call, still had negative VSI, and bottomed out around 350 feet.

What had happened? Another Hornet had bolted and was hooked in at four miles. The controller had locked the Hornet in the hook by mistake. Because the controller had 404's address dialed in, 404 received 203's data-link information. In other words, 404 and 203 received solid needles all the way to 203's ball call.

This is one of those situations people always say can happen but seldom does. I broke some of the basic rules of flying a night Case III approach to the ship, because I had become unquestioningly confident in the SPN 46 carrier-landing system. I now fly every approach as if it was self-contained, and I keep the ILS up in HUD at least until pushover.

In the words of every FRS LSO to every replacement pilot, "Back yourself up and fly your numbers. Remember, everyone at the ship is trying to kill you." Always back yourself up and cross-check your systems, especially when you are feeling behind the jet. You will never know the information you are relying on is incorrect unless you have something to reference. 🦅

Lt. Rhodes flies with VFA-147.