Cockpit Photo by Ted Carlson
Photo-composite by Allan Amen

# What Is an A-6 Doing Way Out Here?

*by Lt. Brian Nichols*

Fly-off day at last. We were preparing for a fly-off from an East Coast cruiser at the end of a work-up. I was on my first underway period as an aircraft commander in the SH-60B, about to do my first fly-off with nobody in the other seat to bail me out when things went wrong. The weather seemed typical for the Norfolk area: a fairly low cloud deck and limited visibility. After spending a few years in Norfolk during my SH-2F days, I had gotten used to the weather and was not intimidated by it. The weather was above minimums for a fly-off, and I was confident that it would not be a problem.

During our preflight brief in combat, I learned the ship was 68 miles southeast of NAS Oceana. OK, I thought, not a big deal. Since there are plenty of TACAN stations to pick up along the coast, I would launch and head northwest while working on getting a TACAN lock on Elizabeth City or something south of Oceana. I figured that

because of our altitude and distance, Oceana's TACAN would be out of range. Once we got a TACAN fix, we would orient ourselves, continue up the coast to Virginia Beach, and then use normal course rules to get to NAS Norfolk.

After launching from the ship, we soon discovered that the ceiling was not as high as had been briefed, but still high enough to be VFR. I had my H2P take the controls while I cycled through various TACAN channels of stations along the coast. I started with Elizabeth City's TACAN and was working my way southward, but none of them were coming in. Meanwhile, we were still heading northwest, and the ceiling was coming down. I noticed that my junior pilot was starting to get nervous, so I told her we'd fly just long enough to get a lock on one of the TACAN stations, figure out where we were, and then make the call to either proceed to the beach or go back to the ship. I knew the aircraft's TACAN was working, because I could still get a lock on the ship.

I looked at the VFR sectional and started to second-guess myself, especially when the ceiling dropped to about 300 AGL. I told my copilot to stay under the clouds and slow to 60 knots while we troubleshot the TACAN and worked out a plan. I switched back to the ship's channel to check our distance from the ship. We had only flown about seven miles from the ship. What was going on? Why would the ship's TACAN work when so many on the coast would not? At that point, we decided to set up a shallow orbit while we discussed whether or not to return to the ship. This option, of course, was painful because it could potentially mean having to get cleared for a fly-off from the pier in Norfolk. The powers-that-be usually frowned on this ploy, especially when you had an "up" helo.

Just then, an A-6 came screaming by. "Hello!" I exclaimed to myself. "What in the hell would an A-6 be doing way out here?" I didn't think it would be that far off the coast, especially flying as low as it was. I got that gut feeling that I hate: something was very wrong. It was the feeling that many LAMPS pilots know too well when operating from ships. I dialed in Oceana's TACAN and watched as the needle locked on directly ahead of us, and the DME read 4.0. Aaaaah!

I told my copilot to do an immediate 180-degree turn back out of Oceana's class D airspace. I still had the ship on the datalink, and I somehow managed not to yell when I told the ASTAC that we were a little closer to Oceana than he had briefed. I told him we were 120 degrees at four miles from Oceana, and we had already broken their airspace. He told me he had measured the distance to Oceana well before the brief and had forgotten to update it. Aaaaah!

"OK, time to get back into the game," I thought. Once we were established outside of the class Delta, I switched to Norfolk approach's frequency to get a GCA pickup. My heart was pumping much too hard as I waited for them to tell me to call the FAA once on deck to get my flight violation for breaking airspace without clearance. Either they hadn't noticed or chose not to do anything. We got our GCA pickup and landed at NAS Norfolk 15 minutes later.

I had pushed too hard to meet the mission, especially when the weather started going sour soon after takeoff. I had pushed when the ceiling fell well below what it should have been. When my copilot told me I was pushing the situation, I finally realized that my urgency to get us home was putting us into a corner. The latitude and longitude given in the brief put us 50 miles off, compounding the problem. We nearly had a midair collision due to the limited ceiling and visibility, and could easily have received a flight violation for busting Oceana's airspace without clearance.

It is easy to say you won't fall victim to get-home-itis. I learned the hard way how quickly it can occur, especially when coupled with the pressure of trying to prove yourself as a new aircraft commander. I did many fly-offs after that one in my last tour. I always double-checked our position on the map, and I never pushed it.

Lt. Nichols wrote this article while flying with HSL-44. He is now in Air Operations at NAS Brunswick.