

Big Plane, Small Sky

By Lt. Matthew Schlarmann

Our Prowler squadron was privileged to be the first squadron to simultaneously support two campaigns in separate AORs. This situation challenged our ready room during our winter combat cruise.

During the deployment, we conducted split-site operations from the ship in support of Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) and operated from an Iraqi base in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF). Supporting two different theaters meant learning two separate SPINS (special instructions), ROE (rules of engagement), tactics, and, as it turned out, hazards to flying.

Our operational plan was to establish a monthly rotation between the two locations. I just had rotated back to the ship after getting used to the relatively busy flight operations in Iraq.

With three trips into Afghanistan in the backseat of a Prowler, I was slated for my first front-seat hop on what seemed to be a “normal” flight in support of OEF. Because it was my first flight in the new AOR, I made sure to painstakingly go through the admin portion of the flight to get my crew and myself out of the expeditionary mindset and back into carrier ops. The last part of the Prowler briefing guide mentions “lookout doctrine,” something that is very important around the carrier when you have up to 30 aircraft, in a block of 3,000 feet above the carrier, all jockeying position for their turn on the ball. My technique is to brief, “To call out traffic, using clock code, high/low, factor/no factor, and from the backseat, be descriptive, rather than directive.” Little did I know that those five seconds of the brief ultimately would save my life.

The first three hours of the flight were very uneventful—as much so as it can get when you are taking a nugget pilot to the iron maiden for gas three separate times. The weather over Afghanistan wasn’t the best but workable: an overcast layer from FL180 to FL215, and then scattered-to-broken layers above that up to FL240. We essentially were working in a hole at FL220.

With twilight conditions, which caused a lot of shadows, we didn’t see any traffic, except for the tanker. We were complacent and mistakenly thought we were the only jet in the sky. Contributing to our “fat, dumb, and happy” outlook was the fact the controlling author-

ity cleared us into our working area at FL220. They had said no other traffic was in our area.

As we started our second orbit, I noticed a small black speck materialize from the clouds at our 1 o’clock. I wasn’t sure if it was my eyes playing tricks on me with the time of day, or if it was the dirty canopy, so I called the traffic and immediately began to talk the pilot’s eyes onto it. After a lot of straining to see around the “Grumman iron,” the pilot called “visual” and added it looked like it was “coalitude.” He then climbed—good



Photo-composite image.

thing, too, because before I knew it, we were in a right-to-right pass with a C-130. Only 500 feet separated us. The C-130 didn’t alter its course at all, which led me to believe they never saw us. We never heard a call from the controlling agency telling us of the traffic. When we queried them immediately after the incident, we got no response. With no word from anyone, we continued our mission and reported the incident in our misrep.

Even in an age when we have a lot of technology to improve our situational-awareness (SA), the Mk-1 Mod-0 eyeball still is the only tried-and-true method of locating and maintaining separation from other aircraft. I am convinced if we had not seen the C-130 and climbed when we did, we would have been a smoking hole in the sky. 🦅

Lt. Schlarmann flies with VAQ-140.