

Simulated Emergency, Real Near-Midair

By *Ens. Ernesto Arboleda*

To student naval flight officers (SNFOs), instructors always stress good lookout doctrine throughout every evolution to maintain safety of flight. This doctrine is important in the environment where VT-4 conducts its training, especially the proximity of Sherman Field to Whiting Field. One morning, though, I would learn exactly how important it was to keep my eyes out of the cockpit and not necessarily trust the naval-aircraft-collision-warning system (NACWS) in the T-6.

I just had started the contact phase of training in the T-6, and like any first-time student, I was nervous. I prayed I wouldn't be known as that guy who was so slow he became the laughing stock of the instructor ready room. So, after a typical climb-out into the MOA (military-operating area), the IP (instructor pilot) and I went through the typical maneuvers every student should know during the contact phase of training. After completing a series of helmet-fire-inducing maneuvers, we decided to drop out of the MOA and go through a series of EP (emergency-procedure) drills and a simulation of an ELP (emergency-landing pattern) at Baron OLF (outlying field). The flight then went from uneventful to almost life-threatening.

My IP said T-34s out of Whiting Field typically would fly—almost unannounced—through the airspace around Baron, so we should maintain a good lookout doctrine while in the area. We simulated an in-flight engine fire, and after simulating the boldface for the EP, we began to set up for high key at Baron. We announced our intentions over the radios and got clearance to simulate the ELP.

Just then, approach said a T-34 was entering the pattern, and we started searching for it. When we didn't see

the T-34, we scanned our NACWS to determine where he was in relationship to us. As we became task-saturated, because of the simulated ELP and the T-34 somewhere out there, I began to concentrate only on my instruments.

Then a T-34 passed 500 feet below our left wing, and about two seconds later, the NACWS went off. As a typical student, who was new to flying, I had no idea what was going on or what to do. After about five seconds, the IP had leveled the aircraft and decided to forgo the ELP. Afterward, the pilot of the T-34 called on the radio and requested a touch-and-go at Baron.

I had lost situational awareness (SA) during the last few critical moments because of the simulated ELP and while trying to identify the T-34. I was so concerned about correctly completing the ELP, I had forgotten that not completing the ELPs wouldn't kill me but that a T-34 smacking into my aircraft would. Also, I had relied on the NACWS to identify the T-34.

During ground school, we learn the famous mantra: aviate, navigate, and communicate. Part of aviating is keeping a good lookout doctrine. When ATC says another aircraft is close to you, your first priority is to find that aircraft. It's a safe bet that whatever you currently are doing isn't going to kill you, but that aircraft close to you will.

Never trust the other guy. Although we had declared our intentions at Baron, it appeared the T-34 was intent on completing the touch-and-goes. The area we operate in can become busy at times because of all the ongoing training, and it's usually full of first-time student pilots or navigators. Keep your head on a swivel and be mindful of those around you, because no one wants to become a statistic. 🛩️

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