

I Think We Just Dropped on a Ship

By Lt. Zach Evans

We were well into Groundhog Day at sea. Operation Enduring Freedom sorties and overhead strike-cap sorties had become routine.

Our squadron had been scheduled for some unit-level training hops to brush up on basic tactics. I was scheduled for my SFWT 3.8 night, high-altitude, section bombing. We were on the 1.5-hour night cycle with no S-3 gas, which meant we would be on ladder at level off.

The brief went fine. My wingman critiqued me on how to brief a new guy, including what to emphasize. The brief covered section roll-ins on smoke in the water, with Mk-76s, using a 090-run-in heading with the wind.

After the brief, we discussed our fuel situation. We were on ladder from the get-go and decided to conserve gas by doing only level deliveries from 20,000 feet. The syllabus flight would be incomplete, but at least I would get some training on procedures. I also would lead a section around the ship at night.

Preflight was normal, and I noticed my jet didn't have a FLIR. I would be relying solely on the goggles for ID. I launched first and headed to the bomb-drop box.

Twenty miles from the waypoint, I went air-to-ground sea search on my radar to look for surface contacts. I set up an orbit at the waypoint, at 20,000 feet, and waited for my wingman to arrive. The moon was shining from the east, and the winds were out of the west. My wingman soon arrived and was also in the sea-search mode. My radar page was clean, and I didn't see anything below with my goggles. I called strike and reported the target area visually checked clear. Strike responded and called for an airborne contact to the south. I went back to my air-to-air set as we joined in combat spread, heading 090. My wingman was on my left, and I called, "In place right," to set up for the smoke drop.

We drove out to 15 miles, fenced in, and went through our air-to-ground checks to manually

drop smokes on the first pass. With my wingman on my right, I called, "Coming right."

My wingman interpreted this call to mean, "In place right."

About three-quarters through the turn, my wingman called blind. I looked to my 2 o'clock and saw him acute. We realized what happened as we rolled out in lead trail. We agreed to drop our smokes as singles on the 090 course line, two miles before the waypoint. We assumed this plan still would put the smokes relatively close to each other.

My wingman dropped his first smoke, extended five miles, and I dropped a smoke. I told him to turn left as I joined on his left wing in combat spread. We headed back to the west. I couldn't see if the smokes had lit off, and I asked my wingman if he could see them. He said he had contact with two good smokes.

At 15 miles, I called, "In place left." Halfway through the turn, I spotted one of the smokes. I reported, "Tally smoke," and continued my turn. As I rolled out, I bunted over the nose to designate the smoke in the HUD. I noticed the other smoke was off to the right. I climbed to 20,000 feet and got on the ASL heading 070.

I pickled off one Mk-76, and my wingman did the same shortly afterward. About five seconds later, I heard him say, "I think we just dropped on a ship."

In his FLIR, a shadow began to break out behind the light. Then a wake began to appear. The image was clear on the CONRAC in the ready room. Fortunately, we weren't lasing, and the Mk-76s fell short of the moving target. As we passed overhead, the glare of the moonlight on the water receded, and with our goggles, we could see a wake behind the ship.

Just to the south, a couple of miles from the ship, were two smokes about two miles apart. All three lined up in a north-south direction. We called, "Knock it off," and notified strike of a ship in the target area.

We were lucky on this one. As CAG put it, "We dodged a bullet." The first mistake was not doing a thorough sanitization sweep of the area. Two sweeps from 10,000 feet or lower in the target area, 90 degrees out from each other, probably would have picked up the ship.

The second mistake was not redressing the section and dropping our smokes as a pair, instead of in lead-trail. This would have put the smokes closer together. Third, the FLIR can't discern a Mk-58 smoke from 15 miles away. It, however, can detect the hot smokestack of a ship.

We may have been rusty; a thorough brief on how to drop smokes at night would have been a good idea. Discussing what to see and expect could have flagged attention to the chain of events that led to the near-hit of a merchant ship.

And last, QA the training. Nothing wrong with bringing back Mk-76s to the ship if you don't have the gas to train as you briefed. 🇺🇸

Lt. Evans flies with VFA-146.