

Keep Your Head Out of the Cockpit

by Cdr. Mike Mahan, USNR

It was a typical summer evening at our air-station training base in South Texas. I was in my second year as a T-2 SerGrad, closing in on my 1,000-hour patch and working hard to make Instructor of the Month (by flying the most hours). The squadron was in a PTR push, and everyone was flying three hops per day, six days per week. Somehow I got on the noon-to-midnight shift—flying two day sorties and a night event—for what seemed like weeks on end.

My student and I briefed, manned up, and launched on our night fam 1 into clear skies. The students were getting the hang of the “Battle Buckeye,” and this hop was a first-look, safe-for-solo, check flight. We would have to fly a 30-minute VFR navigation route, then get in the pattern for some circus landings. Very straightforward.

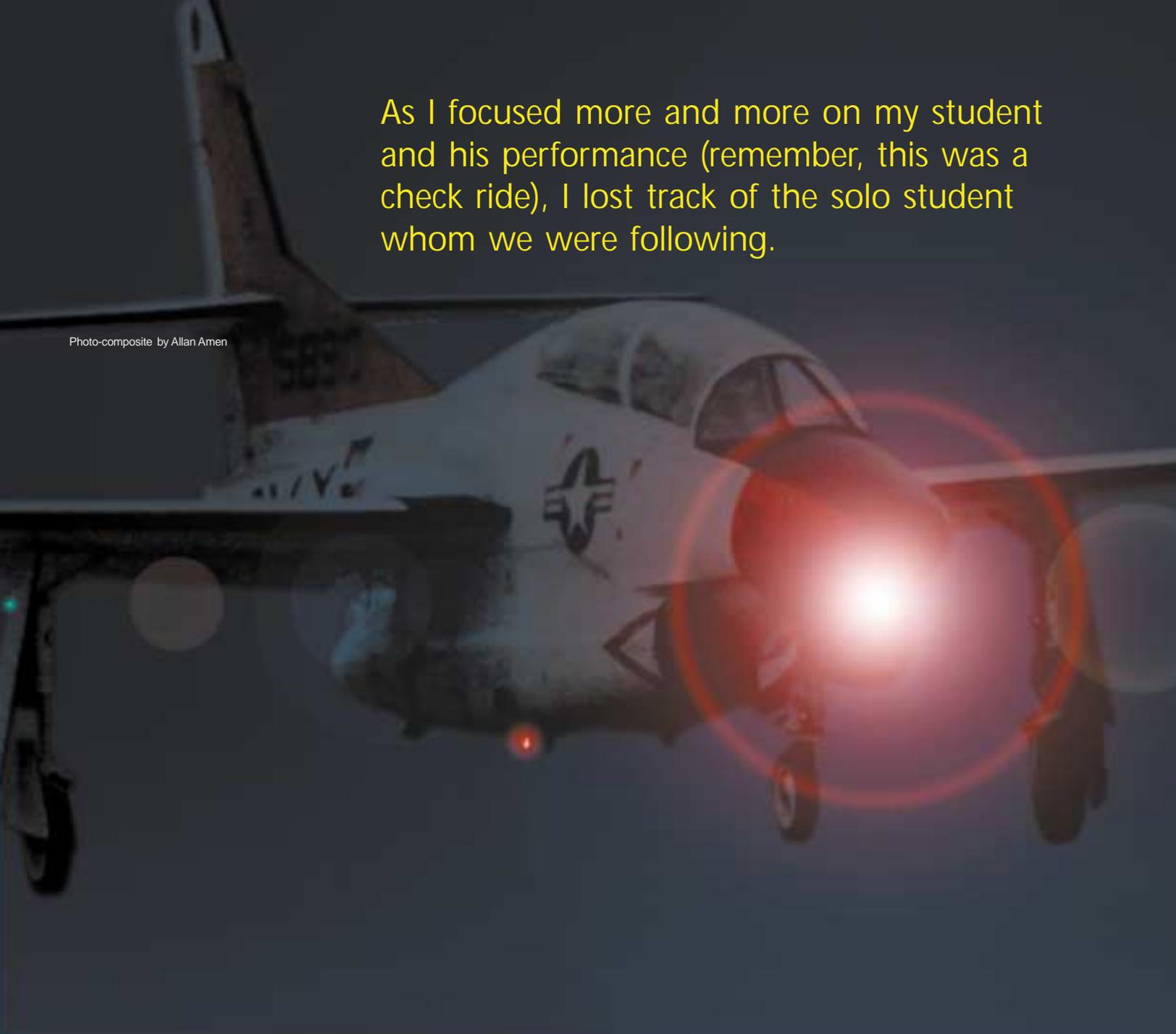
The nav portion went well, and we eased our way in to the bounce pattern. Like most nights in the training command, the pattern was full. My job was simple. I had to coach my young apprentice through three full-flappers; a half-flap, single-engine, boost-off; and a no-flap, no-speedbrake

fullstop. And, by the way, keep track of the other dozen or so orange-and-white jets. No problem, I was selectively retained.

Soon it was no-moon dark. I wondered where all the other commanders were. We completed the normal stuff, and it was time for me to pull an engine on the ensign. “Simulated engine failure,” I declared. My junior birdman recited his procedures, and we turned off the abeam. Not enough rate-of-descent, high 90, and a clara, high start. Squadron SOP required us to wave off if we didn’t have a ball *somewhere* on the OLS. So we went around.

After discussing that first attempt, we tried again. Same result, high all the way, and a waveoff. I was going to have to earn my instructor pay. Upwind, crosswind, and downwind, I pontificated on the virtues of Zen and the art of the single-engine approach, but it just wasn’t soaking in. I began to lose my situational awareness.

As I focused more and more on my student and his performance (remember, this was a check ride), I lost track of the solo student whom we were following. That student flew wide abeam and



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Photo-composite by Allan Amen

long in the groove. Meanwhile, my student and I were tight abeam and turned early. We once again were high, rolling into the groove. Then I heard someone call the ball! All my attention had been drawn into the cockpit, and I was momentarily confused. We were in the groove, but the ball call hadn't been my student's voice. Yee-ikes! Simo run in the groove!

I quickly looked down and to my right, and sure enough, about 100 feet below and 300 behind, was the solo. At the same time, the tower saw the near-collision and waved us off. Aggressively we

went around and, once clear, I swallowed hard to get my heart out of my throat and back into my chest. I thanked my maker, composed myself, and we completed the hop.

After a lengthy debrief and discussion about VFR-lookout doctrine, I signed off my student as "safe for night solo," contemplating our close-call. We were both guilty of not keeping a good VFR scan. Loss of Situational Awareness is a helpless feeling, and—assuming you survive it—a humbling one, too. 🇺🇸

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