

# Bumper Cars

By Lt. Jeffrey Strawn

September 23, 2002 is a day I never will forget; it was my first night-formation flight in the mighty Goshawk. I had been figuring out the complexities of the night rendezvous and sweating just trying to stay in a proper parade position. As we penetrated the multiple cloud layers that had developed on this southwest Texas night, we prepared for our recovery from the military-operating area (MOA) west of Kingsville. I was getting more comfortable maintaining parade

position for our section approaches and the subsequent depart and reenter. Up to this point, my aviation career had been uneventful.

We completed our final section approach. As we made the turnout to the initial, I anticipated the end of the flight. When we approached the numbers for the break, a solo student pilot was cleared to take off. At that time, there was no standard operating procedure to deconflict break traffic from aircraft taking

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Composite image

off (i.e. departure traffic maintain 1,000 feet until the upwind numbers). Controllers merely used timing to deconflict the arrival and departure traffic.

My instructor in the back seat asked, “Tower, did you just clear somebody for takeoff?”

We continued toward the upwind numbers as my lead broke away, and, four seconds later, I initiated my break. The lights of the sprawling metropolis of Kingsville were bright and at my 10 o’clock at three miles. I was positioned just in front of the upwind numbers, at 250 knots and 1,000 feet AGL, when I initiated the break. As I got to 50 degrees AOB, I heard a loud bang—we had hit something. We rolled back to the right and started to oscillate. I neutralized and checked the altimeter. Eventually, we regained control and stopped the oscillations.

Once we were straight-and-level and stabilized at 1,000 feet, my instructor took his hands off the ejection handle and took control of the aircraft. I looked over to my 9 o’clock and saw another T-45 within 500 feet of us initiating a climbing turn away from us. We climbed the opposite way and eventually managed to maintain VFR. We ended up several miles southeast of the field at 9,000 feet, which, coincidentally, was the designated bailout and ejection area.

I broke out the T-45 book, and we configured the aircraft for a straight-in arrestment. The hair on the back of my neck started to stand at attention while I

read the steps. Before my instructor moved the gear and flap handle, he said, “If we go out of control, you know what to do... .”

As we held our breath, the gear and flaps came down, and we were able to maintain control. The right wing of the solo’s jet had hit the left side of our nose and fuselage next to my knee. I never saw the other jet, and my instructor just caught a glimpse of it. We trapped on the inboard duty, and the solo trapped on the right. Urine and blood sampling from all parties followed, making a lengthy evening even longer.

The mishap board concluded that the causal factors were:

- ATC negligence.
- The solo’s failure to clear the space above him.

(To clear above him would have been difficult because we were above and behind him but overtaking him.)

- Our failure to clear the airspace below us. (This action would’ve been a challenge, because he was below and ahead of us. The last time I checked, the T-45 doesn’t have a glass floor.)

- Lack of a published arrival and departure procedure. (Elevating into the tower pattern over the runway while departing the field never was a common practice).

There were no major injuries, and the contact was equivalent to a bad hit when driving bumper cars. All I can say is it wasn’t our time to depart this world. The old air-combat maneuvering (ACM) saying is true, “It’s the guy you don’t see who’s gonna kill ya.” 🦅

Lt. Strawn flies with VAQ-133.

# Mishap-Free Milestones

HMM-774	36 years	75,000 hours
VP-40	39 years	249,000 hours
VAW-124	13 years	24,800 hours
HMLA-167	21 years	100,000 hours
HMM-164	9 years	40,000 hours
VP-47	33 years	190,000 hours
HSC-85	36 years	70,000 hours