

A Not-So-Simple Day Case III



By Lt. J. W. Stigi

The scenario began as expected. In one of the oldest Navy traditions, a real “good deal” had fallen to the very bottom of the squadron’s totem pole: The junior WSO teamed up with a brand new 0-4 (hinge) pilot for a day-night deck and CATCC certification of the carrier.

I recently had arrived in Virginia Beach after a year in Lemoore, Calif., and was more than content to smile and nod at just about anything sent my way. Even though the deck cert was planned for a Saturday, I fig-

ured if my buddies in Lemoore could handle weekend after weekend of struggling to find a good time, I could afford to sacrifice one Saturday for the team.

The squadron was two weeks away from departing on our first at-sea period of work-ups, so I didn’t mind the opportunity to knock some rust off my CV procedures. One trip to the boat for RAG CQ (replacement air group carrier qualification) had given me a small knowledge base, but I knew I was headed to the carrier with just about zero real-world experience.



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In the days leading up to the event, I tackled the CV NATOPS for my safety... and just in case my former light-blue-wearing pilot decided to bring the heat. I figured I was safe from any “arrow critiquing” while in the back seat, but he was a hinge, and you just never know. Unfortunately, by the end of that Saturday, my proverbial experience bucket would be slightly more filled, and my luck bucket would be drained.

I arrived early at the squadron for an uneventful CQ brief with my pilot and the lead crew; ORM was covered in-depth. We noted the inherent hazards of operating around the boat, particularly magnified during a CQ and certification evolution, when training would take place all over the boat. I already looked forward to a night-taxi fam of the rounddown about as much as I looked forward to releasing the 2006 “Legacy Hornet Ball” video. The squadron’s senior paddles gave the brief, and I walked, feeling comfortable and prepared with the day’s game plan.

Preflight and man-up proceeded without incident, but just before taxi, our lead had to hop in a spare jet for maintenance. My pilot and I quickly decided to press out as a single, and we launched to make our briefed overhead time.

Our transit to the carrier went smoothly, and we quickly found it in the local working area. After a sweet comm and sweet lock, we lost the ship’s TACAN. This problem lasted throughout the day (weeks later, we found out the carrier had experienced electrical-bus failures, which degraded communication, navigation, and radar in varying degrees). Because of the unreliable TACAN, marshal issued individual aircraft lat-long coordinates and an altitude for marshaling purposes. After I entered the waypoint and found the ship using the sea radar, everything seemed suitcased for a manual push when I considered my first real dilemma of the day: saving the second half of my turkey sandwich for dinner or going all-in at lunch.

After an extended period of drilling holes in marshal, we received our manual push and left the stack as the sixth of eight aircraft scheduled for the day. The carrier was running dual-frequency ops, and we were positively switched to button 15 during our descent. I worked the sea radar like a bachelorette party in Key West and kept a rough estimate of our distance from the boat, but the TACAN completely was out at this stage in the game. We leveled off at 1,200 feet and proceeded inbound on approximately the final bearing, with little help from the controller. My pilot continued with the approach and rogered-up a “see me” call at roughly eight miles. We received ACLS (automatic-carrier-landing system) lock-on, and things looked solid. About four to five miles out, the approach controller called “Ninety-nine, switching to Case II” and pushed us to button one. And so the plot thickened.

Although I never had encountered a situation like this, I was confident we were cleared to continue our approach, given our position inside of 10 miles from the boat. Soon after the switch to button one, we heard over the radio, “Approach, 312, at 3.5 miles, confirm I’m continuing the approach.”

While I couldn’t determine our exact distance from the boat, the hairs on the back of my neck stood on end as I realized we had to be close to 312, and I had zero situational awareness (SA) of his position. I quickly shifted the radar from tracking the carrier to sanitizing the skies in front of us. I started to voice concern to my pilot and looked over my left shoulder to scan for 312. I was greeted with the enormous sight of a Hornet’s right mainmount heading for our left vertical stab. I shouted an expletive and “Over the top!”

My pilot unloaded the jet, and 312’s mainmount missed our vertical stab by about 10 feet. We took an aggressive cut to the right, and my pilot, recognizing the pilot of 312 by voice, called him over button one to look right. At this point, 312 finally saw us, did a double take, and raised his gear to break off the simo-approach.

My pilot followed his transmission with a call to tower that we just had had a 10-foot pass on approach, and we planned to proceed overhead at 2,000 feet for low holding. We quickly asked for a Rhino rep and were directed to button 18. After several unsuccessful attempts to hail the rep, I returned to tower, called no joy, and again asked for a Rhino rep. This request was met with the response, “202, what’s your deal?”

Having just had a Charlie Hornet mainmount nearly

clip our jet, I had more than a few choice responses for the Boss. I decided I might need that lieutenant money if I ever wanted a radio for the Impala, so I let my pilot handle the next call. He reiterated to tower we just had had a near-miss and would like to speak to a Rhino rep. He said it more calmly than I could have.

Tower responded with, “What do you say we get everyone on deck, and we’ll sort this out.”

I was stunned.

After landing, the incident never was addressed by tower for the rest of the more than six-hour evolution. Given the attitude from tower, neither my pilot nor I felt inclined to raise the issue again unless the ship planned to ask us for information. They never did.

As we taxied around the flight deck, the realization of just how close we’d come to a midair began to sink in. Leveling off on the approach, my pilot had followed his usual habit pattern of keeping the jet level at 1,200 feet with his expert pilot skills. Those skills had us at 1,170 feet when 312 passed over us. Thankfully, my pilot was a “patch” and not a Blue Angel. Given his angle of attack on the approach, it’s highly unlikely 312 ever would have seen us before his mainmount made short work of our vertical stab.

During the resulting investigation, a multitude of causal factors were identified. The carrier’s compound-ing electrical issues resulted in serious degradation of their systems. These issues included a complete failure of the TPX-42 that fuses IFF (identification friend or foe) interrogator data with SPN-43 air-search-radar video. Using a SWO-secret decoder ring, I determined this failure left the controllers with no aircraft data associated with their raw radar returns, and no graphic display of the final bearing line. Mother Nature played a role, as she often does, with a squall line and precipitation to clutter radar returns, which resulted in weak target video. The final blow came at about six miles, when the SPN-43 radar completely stopped radiating, and positive control of both aircraft was lost.

CV NATOPS does not provide clear guidance for transitioning from Case III to Case II operations with aircraft inside of 10 miles. Combining this procedural uncertainty with the carrier’s systems issues led both pilots down the road to this near-midair collision. This situation could have been mitigated earlier by asking guidance from tower or approach. All the aircrew involved are fortunate we came away unscathed from what started as a simple, day, Case III event. 

Lt. Stigi flies with VFA-103.