

The Phantom TCAS Hit

By Ens. Jessica Barrientos

Early August found me scheduled for one of my T-1A Jayhawk low-level navigation events. In July, the weather had been good in the morning and you got SIGMETed in the afternoon. Now, when I drove to work in the morning, the clouds already were building and would get worse as the day progressed.

In the preflight brief, the pilot, mission commander, and I agreed the weather looked good enough to fly the route. The radar picture we saw on the ground showed a few cloud layers but no ceiling to prevent us from flying the victor route (VR). We made a mental note to be watching on our return for cells that formed during the low-level.

Once airborne, we completed the normal departure procedures and climbed to our altitude of 10,000 feet. We eventually were switched to Mobile Approach and given the local altimeter. When the pilot gave the OK, I cancelled IFR and directed the pilot to point A of VR 1022. We were over Mobile Bay and had a scattered cloud layer at about 3,000 feet. Because we were VFR, we worked our way down to 1,500 feet by dodging clouds.

When we had descended to about 20 feet below

the layer, our TCAS (traffic-alert-collision-avoidance system) screen lit up with a yellow dot, and the computer started to scream at us. The pilot quickly turned hard left and put the aircraft into a steep descent. We looked intently for the traffic, which the computer indicated was about 100 feet above us. Our view of 100 feet above us immediately was blocked by the clouds, and we didn't see any aircraft. The crew continued to be vigilant as we leveled off at 1,500 feet and entered the route, but we never saw anything.

We never were sure if another aircraft really was out there, or if the computer just had given us a false hit.

Here are two good lessons to walk away with:

- Never let the computer take over clearing responsibility. While it's not as if no one was looking outside the cockpit, we just were not as alert as we should have been in a critical phase of flight.

- When transitioning from IFR to VFR and passing through cloud layers, every crew member always must remember clouds are great hiding places for other planes. 🛩️

Ens. Barrientos flies with VT-4.