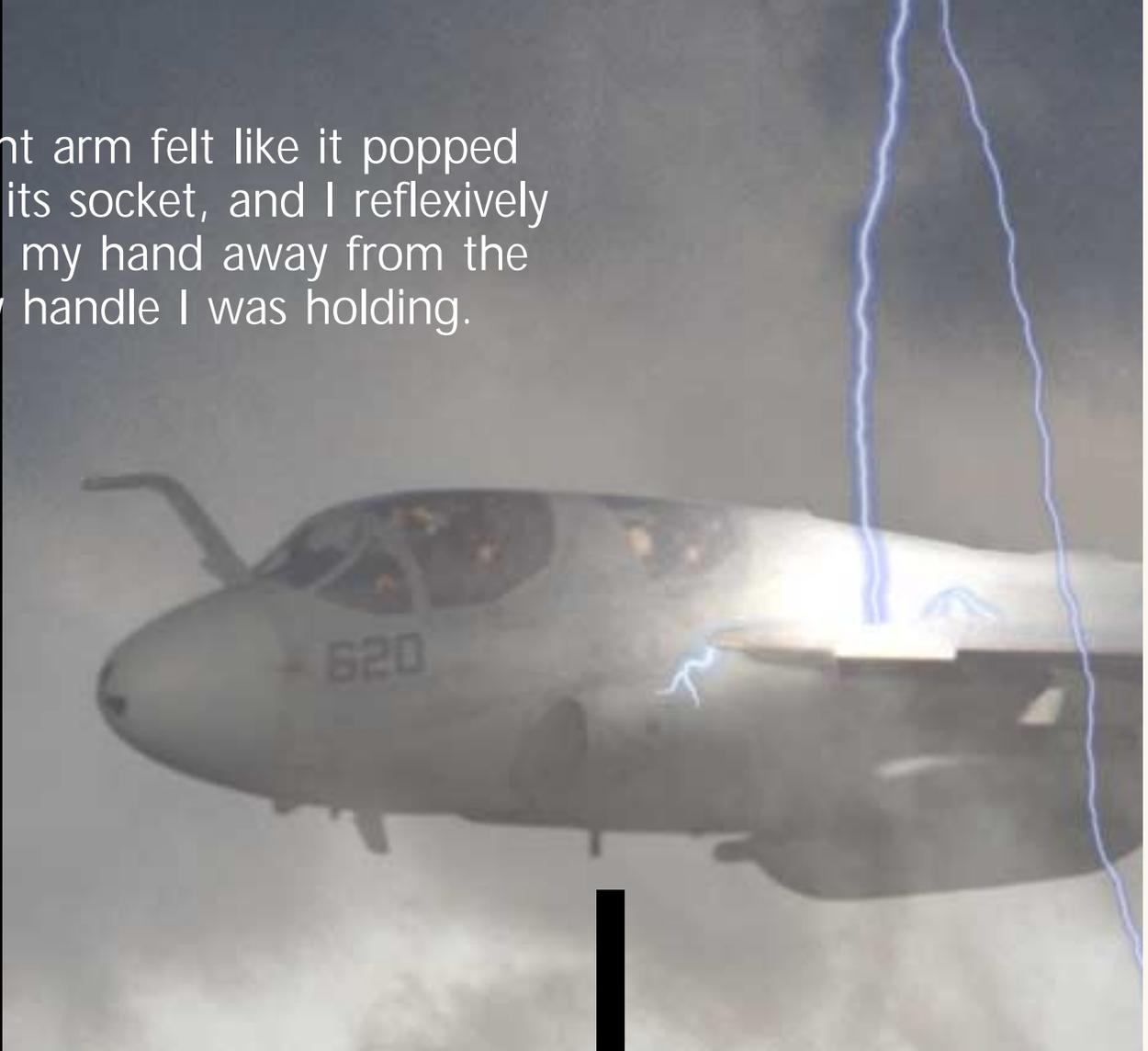


My right arm felt like it popped out of its socket, and I reflexively yanked my hand away from the canopy handle I was holding.



Electro-Shock Therapy

by Lt. Dave Hankamer

It was the third week of a seemingly endless COMPTUEX, filled with GQs, cold showers, and extra-greasy sliders. Even though I was a nugget lieutenant junior grade on my first set of work-ups, I was starting to feel salty around the boat.

One day, our mission was another challenging SSC exercise, dedicated to observing vessels unlucky enough to be transiting the waters off Puerto Rico. Preparing for the noon launch, our crew thoroughly briefed the flight. We reviewed mission specifics, divert information, and boat emergencies. We grabbed a bite to eat, got dressed, and walked up to the flight deck to man our jet. It was a standard Caribbean afternoon, with thunderstorms building up around the boat as we taxied up to the catapult. The Air Boss wisely shifted the launch to Case II. My crew and I weren't worried—we'd seen this weather before, and we were just happy to go flying.

After the standard, mind-numbing cat stroke, we proceeded with the Case II departure. The weather wasn't getting better. There were plenty of holes in the clouds to climb VMC, but it took 10 minutes before we finally found an open area where we could see the ocean, and I reported to Bravo Sierra that we were up for their control. Naturally, all the surface contacts they wanted us to investigate were either directly underneath thunderstorms or outside our airspace limits, so we decided to knock off the SSC and call it a day.

We realized that the weather build-up had encircled our jet, leaving us in a 10-mile cylinder of clear air that was rapidly diminishing. There were significant radar returns (indicating heavy rainfall) in every direction. The clouds seemed to top out as high as 40,000 feet, and we decided climbing was not an option due to fuel constraints and our small working area. The pilot and I chose what we thought was the path of least resistance and proceeded back toward the boat. Our TACAN had completely dropped lock and communications with the boat had become sketchy at best. I could feel my saltiness oozing away. The rain slammed into the canopy, and our 45,000-pound Prowler was tossed around like a kite as we drove through the storm.

Then, as quickly as it had started, the rain stopped, and we emerged from the storm into an overcast layer that appeared bottomless. We made our way back to the boat, dodging angry yellow dots on the radar screen, and I told myself I'd never get into that situation again.

We checked in with marshal and complied with our holding instructions, only to find that the controllers aboard the boat had put the marshal stack right on the edge of another storm. Geez—thanks, guys! As we established ourselves on the marshal radial, I heard a tremendously loud crack and saw a bright flash. My right arm felt like it popped out of its socket, and I reflexively yanked my hand away from the canopy handle I was holding. The pilot felt the shock, too, and one of the back-seaters said, "I think we got hit by lightning!"

Excellent deduction, Mr. Holmes. With a shaky voice, I requested new marshal instructions, and we recovered uneventfully.

The mission and operating area had given us a false sense of security about the weather. The brief we'd received on the boat was standard for this exercise and didn't really give us any indication the storms would be so severe. Our so-called familiarity with the Caribbean atmosphere proved to be a big joke; instead of burying ourselves in the mission, we should have kept our eyes outside. Thunderstorms develop quickly, and nobody in our crew saw this problem coming until we were deep inside it.

We should have reviewed our turbulent-air-penetration procedures in greater detail before we tried to cross the storm. These procedures should be memorized like EPs: when you are transiting a storm, treat it as an emergency. Our crew completed most of the necessary steps, but we did them more as an afterthought, instead of reading them off like a checklist. We could have easily missed an important step and dug an even deeper hole.

Finally, we should never have accepted our marshal instructions, given the proximity of the thunderstorm. Our controllers were obviously unaware of the weather conditions along the marshal radial, and no one in any of the aircraft holding (including us) did anything to clue them in to the problem. After lightning hit our plane, I found that rocking the boat and getting the marshal stack moved wasn't a big deal. I think our crew more or less blindly accepted marshal's instructions as gospel, when we should have questioned them immediately. It turns out marshal knew nothing about the weather but did an excellent job of accommodating us when we told them where we needed to hold.

As for the lightning strike, I highly recommend keeping your hands away from metal objects during thunderstorms. Then again, those of you blessed with a little common sense probably knew that... 🦅

Lt. Hankamer flies with VAQ-141.