



High Noon with a Section of Talons

by Lt. Michael Garrick

In July 1997, I was halfway through the advanced syllabus at Kingsville. Just when I thought I was going to be stuck doing all my low-level flights in southern Texas, I managed to get a cross-country to an airshow up north. On leg two of the three-leg return trip to Texas, my instructor and I planned to launch out of Tulsa International and fly the VR 1140 on the way to NAS Dallas. The weather-guessers had forecast thunderstorms west of the route, but the weather picture looked workable, so we decided to press.

Just before walking to the jet, I called the scheduling activity, 90th Flying Training Squadron at Sheppard AFB, to confirm that we still had

the route scheduled. The voice on the other end of the line gave me the OK when I asked him if he had our Blazer callsign on file.

We took off and headed west-southwest to point B on the route. As expected, ATC had to vector us around some cells on the way to the alternate entry point, but we managed to get to VMC. After making the call to Flight Service, I descended to 500 feet and accelerated to 360 knots (the airspeed we had briefed for the route). As we were fat on gas (a rare circumstance in the Goshawk), my instructor told me I could push up the airspeed from the IP to the target, provided my timing looked good.

The route was hardly spectacular, but it was still far more scenic than anything around Kingsville. They say



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that even a blind squirrel finds a nut, and, as we crossed over the lake at point G, it seemed that I somehow had managed to stick close to the timing. Anticipating the call from the backseat, I pushed the throttle to the max stop for the last leg. Out of the nearly 90-degree turn, I scanned the instruments and trimmed out the airplane. I was about to report my instruments to the instructor, when I noticed a black spot up ahead on our altitude. In the blink of an eye, the spot became two aircraft flying a tight combat spread. By the time I consciously realized we were beak-to-beak with the section, I already had bunted the nose.

As we split the formation down the middle I recognized them as T-38s. The RADALT, which was set at 450 feet, now was blaring in my ear. My instructor, who had been quiet to this point, was screaming at me on the ICS. “What the \$%*# are you doing?” he demanded.

“Didn’t you see those two T-38s?” I replied, as I climbed to the top of the block and started to slow down.

A long silence ensued, followed by, “What T-38s?”

As I explained to him what had happened, I could sense his mounting anger. Still in shock from the near-miss but no worse for wear, we recovered uneventfully to NAS Dallas. My instructor’s first call was to the command where the T-38s had come from, the 80th Flying Training Wing at Sheppard AFB. I wasn’t in the room when he called, but I could hear him all the way down the hall in flight planning. As it turned out, a foreign squadron temporarily was using the number listed for the scheduling activity in the AP/1B. The guy I had talked to spoke English well, but he hadn’t had a clue about scheduling the low level—he just had faked it. The VR-1140 is the reverse course of the VR-1139, and without knowing it, we had co-scheduled the two.

A breakdown in planning or an error in judgment didn’t lead to this hairy situation. The sky simply is not that big, particularly at low altitudes. We could have just as easily encountered a bug-smasher piloted by a retiree. Luck is no substitute for a good visual scan. ✈️

Lt. Garrick flies with VAQ-134.