

Near-Midairs With a Train

By LCdr. Ron Dennis

This promised to be another mundane work-up flight. We knew where all the players were supposed to be and when they were supposed to be there. OK, maybe we were getting a bit relaxed, but we'd been doing the same ol' thing for two weeks. We felt it was time to move on to something more challenging. Circumstances were about to provide it.

We launched on time and headed to station. As we leveled off at FL190 and pressed westward, the coastal lights didn't look right. We seemed mighty close to the beach. All of our nav systems were acting up, so we turned north to parallel the coast. We cross-checked the outline of the coast with the nav chart. Sure enough, we were nowhere near where we were supposed to be, and far too close to the coast. (It doesn't take long when you launch only 65 miles off the coast in the first place, and your station is to the west.)

The nav was really out to lunch! We turned toward the horizon-less eastern sky to remain in the warning area. While I wrestled with the charts and the nav system in the right seat, my seasoned, first-tour pilot wrestled the aircraft and

ORM Corner
is a bi-monthly department.

Please send your questions, comments or recommendations to Cdr. John Anderson or to Capt. Derek M. Faherty, Director Operational Risk Management.

Cdr. Anderson's address is: Dept. 11, Naval Safety Center, 1375 A St., Norfolk, VA 23511-4299 (757) 444-3526, ext. 7203 O3N 554; E-mail: janderson@navsafetycenter.navy.mil

Write Capt. Faherty at OPMA/Case N-09K, 2000 Navy Pentagon, Bldg 5E-015, Washington DC 20350-2000 (703) 614-8433; O3N 224; E-mail: faherty.dennis@hq.navy.mil

F-15E and KC-135R. USAF Photo by SSgt. Andy Dunaway. Photo-composite by Allan Amen



E2-C Photo by Matthew Thomas

The pilot slammed the throttles forward and pulled back on the yoke, as I yelled, “Climb, climb, climb!”

his vertigo in the left. I looked up from the chart to scan outside (probably the first good thing I’d done so far that flight) and saw a train of lights off to the northeast moving toward the west. Just as I foolishly said, “What is that? It looks like a train,” the train turned south, directly toward us.

The mission commander, in the back, assured me nothing was on his scope at our 10 o’clock for five miles. But there was no mistaking the set of lights heading our way. Both of us up front realized about the same instant that these lights came from the scheduled big-wing tanker with her chicks in tow. It was co-altitude with us at about a mile and a half. The pilot slammed the throttles forward and pulled back on the yoke, as I yelled, “Climb, climb, climb!”

We passed fewer than 500 feet above the tanker package. They never saw us. Again, the mission commander assured me, “There’s nothing there!” The radar obviously was out to lunch as well.

We were dumbfounded. We knew the tanker was supposed to be northwest of the ship, but they weren’t supposed to be this far to the northwest; they were supposed to be at FL200, not FL190. In hindsight, being 1,000 feet below the briefed tanker altitude wasn’t smart since the

receivers usually rendezvous 1,000 feet below the tanker before moving into refueling position.

We leveled at FL200, regained our composure, and pressed southeast toward our real station. Less than five minutes later, we noticed the train of lights again, this time off to our right, and again coming toward us. I wasn’t too concerned this time since I knew they were at FL190, and we were at FL200. However, as the train drew closer, a dreadful feeling began to creep up from the pit of my stomach. *Deja vu*. At about a mile and a half, I screamed, “Climb, climb, climb!” for the second time. The blasted tanker had climbed a thousand feet. This time, we passed close enough to see into the cockpits of the trailing chicks, all six of them. Again, they never saw us.

Assumptions and complacency nearly had killed us twice in one night. The E-2C weapon system is very good at detecting air targets, but it’s not perfect. Pilots rely on the extra set of eyes in the back of our aircraft, but sometimes those eyes are blind. The necessity to see and avoid was driven into our heads that flight.

Have a plan, and don’t let yourself stall on the tracks in front of a speeding train. You might get blindsided. 

LCdr. Dennis flies with VAW-124.