



The Missed M

By Ltjg. John Egan, USCG

We were falling through the sky at 210 knots when two props suddenly were buzzing 100 feet off our nose. That close, I caught a glimpse of the student-naval aviator in the lead plane.

The sky was covered with clouds, but at least you could do high work or descend below the ceiling and do landing-pattern work. On cloudy days, we pay attention to those holes or breaks in the clouds, where we can nose over and dive through to get under them or put the PCL to the firewall to climb on through. Often, only one hole exists in the training area, and every other student and instructor pilot is thinking the same thing you are: “There’s our hole; that’s where we’re going.”

My incident occurred during a T-34 formation flight. I was the lead at 8,000 feet and was preparing to descend to join course rules home from the training area. I had trouble spotting the sandpits because of a cloud cover at 5,000

feet. My IP was guiding me to the vicinity of the sand pits when we located what appeared to be a tiny break in the clouds northeast of the sandpits. This hole was the only one I had seen the entire flight, and I knew we’d fly through it.

I passed the descend signal to my wingman, and my IP made the appropriate calls. He told other formation flights of our approximate location and our intent to descend. Because the hole was small, I had to make an arcing descent to the right at about 210 knots.

The naval-aircraft-collision-warning system (NACWS) went off at 7,000 feet. I looked for the contact, but I saw nothing. My IP spotted them: another form flight at 7 o’clock, 7,000 feet, and roughly three to five miles away. My IP kept a close watch on them, while I maneuvered the aircraft on the arcing descent. As we continued to descend through 6,500 feet, my IP pointed out a distinguishable landmark important for me to recognize. Just then, the aircraft



Midair

went into what seemed like a 30-degree, nose-down attitude; I hit the top of the canopy and looked up.

Another formation flight was headed straight toward me, not more than 100 feet off the nose. They were in a level, shallow, left turn, while I was in an arcing descent to the right. I saw them for less than one second when they passed overhead. An excess of 350 knots of closure was between us. The IP had spotted the flight at the last second, took controls, and threw down the nose and banked left. We stabilized in a couple of seconds, which seemed like minutes. The IP and I were dazed, and we tried to comprehend what just had happened. After my IP took the controls, we looked for our wingman.

What happened?

What about NACWS? It never went off for the near-miss. The air speed was probably too much for the NACWS to detect in time. However, my wingman's NACWS did go off. The

IP and student saw the other flight after the NACWS hit and quickly banked to the right. My wingman's IP got out a "Traffic, traffic! Traffic!" call to my IP over the VHF radio—that is, when my IP spotted the other flight and took the controls.

It turned out the IP of the other flight never saw us. He called my IP and said he thought we were three to five miles farther west of our current position, which is where the descent for course rules normally takes place.

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The formation flight at 6,000 feet never should have been there. They were too close to course rules, and they never said anything over common frequency when my IP made the descent call. However, my IP and I were too distracted with the formation flight behind us at 7,000 feet and with picking up ground features. Considering the small hole we had descended through, we should have been maintaining better lookout procedures, especially me, because I'm in the front.

What I took away from this near-miss:

- ✈ Don't go through a hole in the clouds if other options are available.
- ✈ If you must go through a hole, realize someone beneath the cloud ceiling might fly directly under the middle of the hole and appear to come out of nowhere as you descend through it. The same concept applies to climbing through a hole.
- ✈ The hole may be the only one in the training area, and, if so, every other T-34 will be converging on that same spot.
- ✈ Don't rely on NACWS. It's a backup, not a substitute, for good scans.
- ✈ Don't rely on the IPs. Treat them like a backup, as well.

I walked away from this incident a little shaken but a wiser and smarter person. By sharing this, I hope you might be a bit wiser and smarter, too. ✈

Ltjg. Egan flew with VT-6.