



Third Times

By Ens. Christopher King

It was, without a doubt, the clearest day I had seen since starting primary at NAS Pensacola. As we climbed out into area one, I was in awe; we had at least 30 miles or more of visibility, no haze, and not a cloud in sight. The only exception was a thin-scattered layer at 1,000 feet in the working area. This was my second warm-up checkride before my fam-solo flight, technically making it my third checkride. I thought, “With the weather as nice as it is today, I’m sure to finally get to solo.”

The flight was uneventful. As expected, this checkride was becoming almost second nature to me. Just as the IP and I had briefed, we first did high work, then shot a PPEL into Barin. We bounced in their pattern a few times, while dodging the large amount of other solo flights invading the pattern. Since the primary-solo field, Saufley, was closed, we headed to Summerdale for more bounces. We wrapped it up, got ATIS, and got established on course rules toward homefield.

On the way back, we were sardined between the copious amounts of solos in front of and behind us. Approach even diverted us off the rules a little bit and had us follow traffic off our nose, so tower could manage the pattern and keep us at proper interval. As we came off point C and onto two-mile initial, we must have been at least the sixth aircraft entering the pattern, with more aircraft behind us.

Because everything was so busy, I concentrated on keeping the traffic in sight off the nose, while we transitioned to 1,300 feet and 170 knots for the break on runway 05. I caught something out the corner of my eye and glanced up to see the silhouettes of two large turkey buzzards rise out of the tree line at 1 o’clock high, about 15 feet above us.

From that point, everything happened at once. In the instant I saw the birds, I remember seeing the one on the left begin to fold its wings. Then I saw a black flash as he dove over the prop. Then I felt it—all in less than a split second. There was no time to react or even to

anticipate what had happened. It felt like someone had taken a baseball bat to my face. I guess I was quick enough to flinch and close my eyes, because I remember opening them after the impact—or, at least, I tried to. What I saw, though, was just a blurred dark grey. All I heard was a muffled, faint sound of a deafening 200-mph windblast hitting me in the bare face. I felt nothing but numbness from the blow, and that’s when I thought, “This must be it, all my senses nearly are gone. I can’t die this way. This really can’t be happening.”

For the next five seconds, more thoughts passed through my mind than I ever thought were humanly possible. Who knows, it might not even have been five seconds. When I later talked to other people about the events, it was evident my sense of time and space was distorted severely from the way I remembered them.

Suddenly, the vision in my right eye came back, along with my hearing and partial feeling in my face. The message relays in my brain must have been impaired from the shock of the blow to my head. The scene before

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me was like something out of a movie. In my disoriented state, I barely could focus on one thing at a time. I subconsciously knew the aircraft still was under control, because I didn’t feel any unbalanced flight, and I noticed the stick was being manipulated from the back. The first thing I focused on, though, was the broken canopy glass in front of me. I then noticed my visor was missing, along with my mic. I couldn’t hear anything in my helmet because of the wind, and I thought my helmet must have been knocked off. The IP later told me that I instinctively took off my helmet, at least what remained of it. The visor had been shattered, leaving only a small portion over my left eye; the left side of my face had taken most of the hit.

The next thing I noticed was the blood—it was splattered everywhere, all over the canopy and inside the

s's the Charm



cockpit. The blood was blown by the wind as it poured out of my face. I thought to look behind me to make sure the IP was OK. I saw him with his helmet on, dark visor still down and unscathed, but with blood splattered all across it. I saw him talking into his mic, and, although I couldn't see his eyes through the visor, he looked worried. The lack of a reassuring look made me think the worst about my condition, but I told myself I would be all right.

I gave him a thumbs up to communicate in some way I still was coherent. I turned around so I wouldn't distract him—confident he had the controls. He was taking it straight-in for final. We hoped they had heard his Mayday call over the windblast and had diverted traffic out of the way. I knew there had to be someone on at least every position in the pattern, the 180, and final.

That's when I thought, even if I lost an eye, at least I was going to make it out of this situation alive—I had the will. Then I remembered the story of the last bird strike that had happened about three or four years ago, in which the IP permanently lost his eye. I then felt

enraged and almost in denial that something so unreal and freakish like this could have happened to me. A bird strike through the canopy always was one of those things that seemed almost like an urban myth: You never think it's going to happen to you. It's like walking outside and getting struck by lightning.

After shouting a few choice words, I calmed down and concentrated on trying to suppress the bleeding from my face. I leaned over to the right side of the cockpit to clear the view for the IP; I think that was around the time I noticed we were on final.

When we touched down, the blood running down from my forehead had started to blind my right eye. As we rolled down the runway and were coming to a stop at the holdshort line, I could see the fire trucks on their way. I took one of the rearview-canopy mirrors and looked in it; the person I saw looking back wasn't me. It was a bloody-red pulp of a face out of a horror movie. I reached up and forced the canopy open—it was jammed part open. The crash crew began to huddle around the plane and me.



LCdr. Pete Cecilia was the instructor pilot during a severe birdstrike in Florida.



The blood in my right eye was too much to keep wiping away, so I just closed my right eye and kept reassuring the crash crew I was conscious and still OK. I later was told it took the ambulance five minutes to arrive after we touched down, but, to me, it seemed like only one minute, at the most. They insisted on carrying me out of the plane on a stretcher, and I got a ride to the ER where they had fun patching me up.

I had several stitches in my face and a completely swollen eye, along with internal bruising of the eyeball itself. I came out fine—my vision and everything else

is like new but I have some scars to remember it by. I am thankful this wasn't my solo flight, because who knows what the outcome might have been. Being blind and disoriented at 1,300 feet and 170 knots, coming into a full pattern, could've been a dangerous combination. At least now I can joke about how I already might have earned myself a call sign early in my career.

The most valuable thing I learned from this event is no matter how on-task and focused you are, you need to push yourself to be even more aware, especially outside the cockpit. If I had been scanning the rest of the sky, rather than primarily looking at the pattern and traffic off the nose, I might have seen the birds earlier. Maybe my incident will open up someone else's eyes. 🦅

Ens. Christopher King is an SNA in VT-6.

The In-Flight Snack Was Fresh Bird Parts

By Ens. G.W. Street

I never thought I would be writing my first safety article so early in my career. I didn't even make it beyond my first solo flight before disaster struck—really hard. It was July 20, 1999, and I was excited and elated after passing my safe-for-solo check ride. The weather was unusually clear for the middle of a summer afternoon in northwest Florida.

After the check ride, I relaxed during my required rest period between events and then reported to the flight-duty officer (FDO). I paid close attention to the solo-flight brief, was assigned a plane, and was told to go have a "good time." Part of me felt nervous, but the other part couldn't wait to get airborne and look back at an empty rear cockpit. The nervous part of me asked if I could stay out of trouble all by myself.

After I preflighted my T-34C, my nerves began to calm, and I strapped into the cockpit. Once I started to taxi, I settled down and began to enjoy a chance to fly solo. I headed for the southwest working area and took a good look at the scenery near the coastline. I proceeded to the outlying field (OLF) for my required number of landings and radioed my intentions to depart the pattern.

It was the RDO's turn to relax a little, because he now had one less solo aircraft to worry about. I departed the OLF pattern and flew west. I was making a routine departure 10 miles west of the outlying field when disaster struck. I just had caught sight of the water tower, which meant I could climb without entering Pensacola's Class C airspace. As I turned my head forward, I spied a large, white bird at my 1 o'clock position and closing fast. He must have grown complacent in his old age, because he didn't take any evasive maneuvers.

I made an instant control input to roll left, but it was too little, too late. I heard the crash through my helmet and felt the wind rushing inside the cockpit. Although the bird was in no pain, I never had been so terrified in my life. The feeling of sheer panic subsided after a couple of seconds, and I decided to quickly figure out what to do.

I only was at 900 feet, so my first priority was to avoid colliding with the ground. My windscreen and visor were covered in bird blood and bird parts. My left eye was swollen almost shut, and the vision out of my good eye was obscured. Avoiding a collision with the

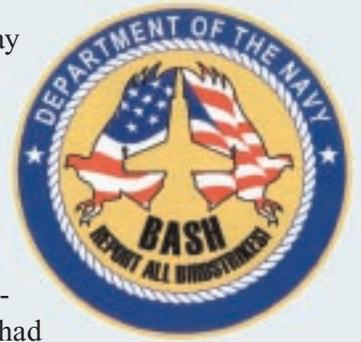
ground was not going to be easy. I felt like I had been punched squarely in the nose by my on-wing. I only could hope the blood all over my face belonged to the bird. With one usable eye, I tried to focus on the attitude indicator and altimeter.

Once I was convinced I safely was maintaining altitude, my next priority was to tell the OLF RDO I was returning for an emergency landing. I wasn't too worried about using routine-entry procedures, but I thought it would be nice to let the RDO know the birdie-hearse was inbound.

Establishing communications was difficult because my boom mike was loose and swinging in the back of my helmet. It was time to improvise. I held the boom mike to my mouth with my right hand, keyed the transmit switch with my left hand, and flew the turbo-weenie between

my knees. I screamed a Mayday call and hoped I had made the right impression to whomever was listening. It was difficult to hear radio transmissions because of the noise in my open cockpit. As I approached the runway and began to decelerate, I heard the RDO say he had me in sight. I felt better after hearing that call. I wasn't lost; someone had heard my Mayday call, and help was on the way. By now, the pattern was clear and I had the whole field to myself. My one and only straight-in approach had been three flights ago, and now I got the chance to do it with only one eyeball.

I touched down with my smoothest landing of the day. I should have tried the one-eye-landing technique much sooner in flight training—I could have saved the Navy a lot of rubber. I taxied toward the crash truck waiting for me at the departure end of the runway, and shut down. I slumped in the seat, trying to convince myself I still was alive.



The canopy had been hit so hard it took two members of the crash crew to pull it open.



The damage was horrendous. The canopy had been hit so hard it took two members of the crash crew to pull it open. After I finally got out of the aircraft, my legs still were shaking too much for me to stand. As I cleaned up, I was extremely relieved to learn most of the blood was birdie blood. My only injuries were facial scratches from the canopy fragments and a big black eye. The bird, however, never was reconstituted and no longer is a threat in alert area 292.

I guess I was ready for my solo flight after all. When anyone asks about my memorable event, I tell them that, without all the seemingly endless, simulated emergencies and instructor feedback, I wouldn't have been able to land with all the degradations and my physical condition. That emergency-procedure practice paid off when I needed it. 🦅

Ens. Street was a SNA with VT-6 and now is training with HT-18.