



A CLOSE CALL AT 300 FEET

By ADCS(AW/NAC) Kevin Smith

It was a beautiful summer day, and our P-3 crew was scheduled for a 0730 brief, a 0800 preflight, and a 1000 takeoff. I was giving a squadron flight engineer a proficiency flight, and the XO was giving a patrol-plane-commander

check flight to one of our upgrading pilots. The weather absolutely was gorgeous.

The preflight went well, except for the multiple gripes in the aircraft-discrepancy book (ADB) concerning the radios: The VHF could

receive but not transmit; the pilot easily could select UHF1 but had difficulty selecting UHF2; the copilot could select UHF1 or UHF2, but he really had to “mash” the buttons on the jackbox to make a radio selection. We planned to stay in the local area, so we didn’t think the radio problems were an issue.

With the preflight, maintenance paperwork, and the planeside brief concluded, we manned the mighty Orion, ready to conduct training. Engine starts, taxi and takeoff went without a hitch. What a beautiful day to go flying: not a cloud in the sky, visibility virtually unlimited, and the temperature pushing 75 degrees Fahrenheit. The flight engineer answered my questions, and the pilot answered the XO’s questions.

The XO gave the flight-station crew a simulated malfunction. I backed up the XO on the radio calls and VFR scan, while listening to our two aviators discuss the situation and the applicable NATOPS procedures. ATC cleared us to 1,700 feet on runway heading, and they called “radar contact” as we passed 1,000 feet. It would be a great day—flying early, no one else in the pattern—it doesn’t get any better.

At 1,700 feet, we started to turn east as directed, and the two upgrading aviators discussed their plan of action for the simulated malfunction. I paid attention to the scenario but continued to listen on the radios and periodically to scan outside. Then it happened. I just had looked up to scan when I saw a Cessna at our altitude about 300 feet in front of us (ATC tapes later confirmed the close call). The plane filled our windscreen. I could not get out a clock position but just simply yelled, “Traffic straight ahead!”

I think the Cessna pilot saw us about the same time we saw him. He banked sharply to his right, and we sharpened our turn to our right for a port-to-port pass.

“Where the hell did he come from?” asked the pilot.

The XO quickly called the controller and told them of a near midair collision. They said they had no traffic on their screen but then immediately reported pop-up traffic. I called our aft observer and had him set condition five in the flight station. Our observer wore a headset, listened to the traffic calls, and became another “pair of eyes.” We had to collect ourselves and regroup after our close call.

What could we have done differently? First, if you have radio problems, get them corrected. It is better to have two good UHFs, or one good UHF and VHF, than to be tied by multiple problems with all three, causing unnecessary distractions. The radio problems didn’t cause the near-midair, but they didn’t help.

Second, do not get lulled into believing you are alone out there. Radar had us, but their coverage is only as good as they can see. This day was one of the first few days of good weather, and many general-aviation aircraft took advantage of it just like we had. The “big sky, little airplane” theory doesn’t replace a good VFR scan. We had a good scan, but we didn’t discuss the increase in VFR traffic because of the terrific weather.

Third, know your area of operation. This guy probably popped up from one of the little grass airfields in the area. I now know of three such fields close to our homeplate. They’re not on our FLIP charts, but, nonetheless, they exist. This info now is in a local-flying-area folder on the flight officer’s desk.

Last, use your observer or off-duty pilot to assist in keeping a lookout in front, while the IP and IFE instruct down low. Another set of eyes may have seen the Cessna earlier, so we could have reacted sooner.

We came close, a little too close for comfort. 

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