

# My Exploding-Head (Ride)

by 1stLt. John R. Gregory

As an intermediate student, I never thought I would write an *Approach* article so early in my aviation career. I have read many valuable and interesting articles while waiting in the ready room, but I did not believe I would have a learning experience I could contribute to the naval-aviation community.

I went with a group of 30 students and instructors on a two-week “gun” detachment to NAS El Centro right after returning from Christmas break. Most of us students were in late-stage forms, going through as fast as we could to get to the gun stage. I finally hit guns at the beginning of my second week, and by mid-stage, I was feeling very confident of my progress through the gun pattern.

Since our arrival at El Centro, students had been steadily going med-down for colds probably because of the change in humidity, the close proximity in which the students worked, or both.

On Tuesday of the last week of the det, I felt like I was beginning to get congested, and I hoped I was not coming down with the same cold many of the students already had. It did not seem to affect my flying that morning, so I did not worry about it.

On Wednesday I felt slightly more congested but still well enough to fly. After finishing the gun pattern, I was coming back to home base in a two-plane formation. As we were coming down through 5,000 feet, I began having problems clearing. I immediately told my instructor we needed to break off from the formation to take my mask off to clear my sinuses.

We circled at the initial until I finally cleared my sinuses. Then we began a slow descent toward the field. We came into the break and landed with no further problems, other than a slight headache from the built-up pressure in my head.

After the debrief, the instructor and I decided not to push it any harder that day and canceled an OCF flight that I was scheduled for later that afternoon. I decided to return to the hotel to try to get some rest and to prevent my congestion from turning into a cold. I did not want to go med-down as I was almost done with guns and felt I had a good grasp on the pattern. I also did not want to delay training for a minor cold. That was my first mistake.

The next day, I had my gun-six check at zero-dark-thirty in the morning. I felt well-rested, but my nose was

still congested. Completing the check ride was the only thing on my mind, so I pressed on. The gun pattern went all right, but as we came back to El Centro and started our descent for the initial, I felt pain in my left forehead—like the day before but more severe. We were flying a tight, Dash-4, parade position, and I decided to take my mask off and clear as I had done the previous day, but with one minor difference: I did not tell my instructor. This was my second mistake.

After repeatedly clearing my sinuses and being told by the instructor (who had no idea what was going on in the front seat) to return to a tight parade position, we leveled off at carrier-break altitude of 800 feet. I felt that my sinuses were now clear, but I had a throbbing in the left side of my head. I did not think it was serious. I still had my mask off, and I decided to leave it off and fly good form. After the break, I could easily put my mask back on, or so I thought.

Lead kissed us off, followed by -2 and -3. Six seconds later I broke and set the G's. Immediately, I felt like someone had stuck a white-hot poker in my left eyeball. It felt as if all the fluids in my nose and sinuses had flooded to the left side of my head, and I felt a pop in my left ear.

The altimeter read about 850 and climbing, but I could not see it very well; my right eyeball felt like it was being forced out of its socket. Then I realized I should immediately tell the instructor that my head felt like it was about to explode and that I could not see. I could not fly the aircraft while putting the mask on, as well as trying to key the mike with just two hands. Trying to talk to my instructor in this condition was my third mistake.

After about two seconds, the instructor took the controls, leveled the wings, got back to pattern altitude and came in for a full stop. We landed with no other incidents and as we were taxiing back to the hangar, my only concern was the throbbing pain in the left side

of my head. It was not until after a thorough debrief, and after I had a chance to sit down and think about what actually happened, that I realized how close I had come to starring in a Class-A mishap. Apparently, the instructor had taken control with the aircraft in a 100-degree AOB, passing through 500 feet.

My first mistake was trying to push a head cold. I am not a doctor, but I should have realized that any congestion might worsen. When I had trouble clearing my nose the previous day, I should have known I'd need medication to return to 100 percent. If I'd have taken 10 minutes to see the flight surgeon, things would have probably gone differently.

My second mistake was not telling my instructor that I had trouble clearing again. I was flying with the same instructor as the previous day, and he knew about my condition. It would have been simple to use a little crew coordination, something that has been hammered into all of us throughout flight training, and let him know again that I was having trouble.

My third mistake was not flying the aircraft when my head was about to explode. I should have let the G's out by leveling the wings. Relaxing the turn would have probably relaxed the pressure inside my head. But even if it did not, my blazing head would have been a lot less severe than becoming a blazing fireball at the end of the runway.

When I finally made it into medical later that day, the flight surgeon said I was lucky to come out with a popped blood vessel in my left ear and a slightly detached membrane from my left sinus. It was only after the debrief that I learned from the instructor where the aircraft was when he had taken control. I later calculated that in a 4-G, 100-degree bank at 500 feet AGL, I had about six seconds before crashing. 🛩️

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