

VFR in a Thu

(No, Not Us, the Other Guy!)

by Lt. Christopher Ognek

So there we were in our EA-6B on another dark and stormy night over southern Japan. The weather was starting to break up, and our plan was to practice flying the ball during several GCAs. Thunderstorm cells were sitting all around Atsugi, but after our first approach, a hole over the field seemed to offer a ceiling greater than 4,000 feet. After an uneventful, on-and-on first pass to runway 01, we picked up our vectors for the box pattern. On our turn to base at 16 miles and 3,000 feet, the control-

Photo-composite by Allan Amen

nderstorm

ler told us to expect a vector past centerline for an aircraft on final. As we shot through centerline, I briefly picked up what I thought was that aircraft.

He was at my 9 o'clock and slightly stepped down. Our headings were 90 degrees out, and I knew we passed directly in front of him because his lights changed from dim to bright to dim again, with no apparent change in aspect. Range at this point seemed to be about three miles. I lost the lights in the clouds after about eight seconds, and we then received a vector of 180. I eased the turn at 20 degrees AOB to increase separation from the GCA traffic.

After about 30 degrees of turn, I picked up the lights again, only this time they grew from dim to bright. They were within two miles and coming right for us. I climbed aggressively and accelerated, while my crew started talking to the controllers, beginning with GCA (a Japanese controller) and finally Approach (a USAF controller), to explain our emergency squawk. My maneuvering brought us from 3,000 feet and 250 knots to 5,500 feet, 60 degrees AOB, and almost 400 knots, all within a five-mile hole surrounded by thunderstorms.

Through 90 degrees of turn, the GCA traffic seemed to accelerate and climb directly toward us. CPA was approximately one-half mile but seemed much (make that *much*) closer in the darkness, a problem compounded by bright white lights aimed directly at our aircraft. At the most extreme point, I thought I was going to have to pull into the threat, out of plane, to force an overshoot because of the continuing CBDR situation.

We finally started to see some separation and discussed the possibility of the aircraft trying to join

on us. As we decelerated to 300 knots and 30 degrees AOB, the separation continued to increase, so we squawked normal and tried to get picked up for a full stop. After being denied for the overhead due to IMC field conditions, we called the field in sight at 3,000 feet and eight miles (a typical scenario in these parts) and were cleared for a straight-in.

After piecing the parts together, we figured out the aircraft was a Japanese P-3 at 19 miles, 2,500 feet, on extended centerline, and flying VFR in a thunderstorm! He had initiated a climbing turn directly into us with a CPA of less than a mile.

There were plenty of lessons learned. Good lookout doctrine is crucial, even when operating under IFR. When you have to maneuver and break a vector or altitude assignment, be sure to squawk emergency. Know the configurations of the lights on all your home-based aircraft, both American and Allied. If I had been able to determine that it was a P-3, I would have known it would have been impossible for him to close on me at 400 knots. Know the altitude blocks of your local GCA and approach controllers. When we left 3,000 feet, we immediately popped into approach control's airspace and sent them spooling through the roof with our emergency squawk. We should have initiated comms with them, instead of trying to sort out things with a Japanese controller who didn't have a clue.

Finally, as we all know, lights can play tricks on you at night. It is very hard to determine range and closure of an unfamiliar aircraft when you're staring at bright white lights. In my case, I estimated the traffic to be a little closer than it was; I'm glad I didn't go the other way and hesitate. 🦅

Lt. Ognek flies with VAQ-136.