

Is That a Shor

by 1st Lt. Patrick M. Glynn, USMC

August 16, 2000, was a typical hot and hazy day in Kingsville, Texas. I was flying T-45As with VT-21, trying to earn my wings. I was excited about the weapons portion of the syllabus. This was going to be my first time dropping Mk-76 bombs from the jet. After all, who wouldn't be excited about spreading the "blue death" all over south Texas? I felt I was ready for anything. I knew my emergency procedures, my SOP, and my tactics. What I wasn't prepared for was my first near-midair.

On this sortie, we would be flying a three-plane pattern instead of the usual four-plane. My instructor and I briefed our flight first. I had dropped bombs in the simulator but hadn't had to deal with communications or other aircraft. My instructor, an AV-8 pilot, went into great detail about the 30-degree bombing pattern, which we would be flying. When we finished, the flight lead briefed all the aircrew. The flight lead was a seasoned S-3 pilot with a good reputation in the weapons pattern. We would hold the Dash 2 position. Another AV-8 pilot flying for his weapons qual, with an instructor from Training Wing Two as his checker, would occupy Dash 3.

The flight took off without incident en route to "Yankee" target, one of the two local targets north of the air station. "Yankee" target was actually a range of three targets in a large rectangle, visible from the air. The left target was a small strafing target for gun runs. The right target was small circle used for rocket practice. The middle target—a large circle—was the only target I cared about. Accuracy

was only a matter of personal pride (the traditional bets on first drop, best drop, and best Circular Error Probable [CEP] had been placed), but one day, Marines on the ground would depend on my proficiency.

Leading into the target was a long, straight, dirt road, very clear from the air, which marked our run-in heading. Per training SOP, if an aircraft rolls in on the target greater than 10-degrees off the run-in heading, that pilot must abort the bombing run. Lead had a little trouble finding the target at first, but he recovered nicely. From the get-go, my helmet was on fire, I had marbles in my mouth and felt I was so far behind the aircraft. Trying to fly the pattern, while keeping our interval in sight and maintaining altitude, proved to be a challenge. Lead called, "One in hot," and began his run. From my vantage point, something looked odd, but what did I know? We began our first run, and I was happy to hit the target. As the flight progressed, I settled down, caught more of the comm calls, and tightened my CEP.

We were flying a three-plane pattern, so it was harder to keep our interval in sight. Since I was on my first weps hop, this pattern was a problem for me. Every time I lost my interval, I had to stay at my sanctuary altitude of 6,000 feet. Every time I reacquired him, I could climb up to 8,000 feet and prepare for my run. Sun angle and haze made it even more challenging, and that is why every pilot must fly the tightest pattern possible. Each time I saw the lead, he was outside of the pattern I was flying.

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cut to the Target?



“One in hot,” lead called. I had lost sight yet again and was unable to reacquire him. I made my abeam call and looked for him in the chute.

“I don’t see him, sir,” I told my instructor.

“He’s in the chute, start workin’ it up,” he told me.

I said, “Sir, I don’t see him in the chute.” I stayed at my sanctuary altitude.

My instructor couldn’t see him either. My instructor’s voice came over the ICS, “Where the hell is...” With that, lead cut across our nose, on his 30-degree, 450-knot dive, over 50 degrees off the run-in heading. He passed us co-altitude, about 200 feet from our aircraft.

After a bit of screaming and swearing in our cockpit, my instructor came over the radio in a stern and sarcastic voice (something he was good at): “Two approaching, now the lead’s in sight!” We watched him violate SOP and drop his bomb (good hit, too). My heart was pounding, and I couldn’t believe how close lead had just come to hitting us. Had there been contact, he would have blind-sided us and the biggest summer firecracker over south Texas would have ensued, with no chance for ejection.

My instructor and I were now partners in survival, rather than teacher and student. He made the calls and I flew a wide pattern to keep lead in sight. My instructor’s call alerted Dash 3 to a possible problem. On the very next

run, lead again rolled in more than 50 degrees off the run-in heading and this time the wing instructor made the call, “Abort, abort. That’s not your run-in heading.” It was easy to gauge how far off he was by comparing his flight path to that large dirt road that marked the heading. We finished the flight without further incident, still not believing what had just happened.

At the debriefing room, flight lead came in and got right down to business. He had me put up the CEPs so we could settle the bets and tally the beer tab. The look of awe on my instructor’s face was worth a million words; of course, none were spoken at that moment.

A number of factors lead to this near-catastrophe. My loss of situational awareness and lack of skill on my first hop didn’t do us any good. I also took for granted my student status and expected the instructors to get me through the flight, something we’re briefed never to do. An enthusiastic flight lead who cared more about scoring bulls and less about the safe conduct of the flight didn’t help the situation. He also flew a horrible pattern. My situational-awareness curve shot through the stratosphere on the next flight. The lead’s weapons quals were yanked, and my instructor threw me a bone for the hop (thanks, Catfish!). 

1stLt. Glynn flew with VT-21 and is currently assigned to VMFAT-101 at MCAS, Miramar.