

Blinded

by the

Light

By Lt. Andy Perez

It was the day every P-3 pilot looks forward to after checking into a squadron: the first flight as a patrol plane commander. The XO was coming back from a pilot trainer, and we would turnaround the plane so I could get some pattern bounces.

He said the pattern was open, but it soon could go IFR. The weather brief confirmed a layer was rolling in. We were ready for an easy preflight, and this event was a great chance to get a few actual approaches. As the XO stepped off the plane, he congratulated me, and his last words were, prophetically, “Don’t break my plane.”

The winter weather in Misawa is cold, and the cloud layer normally tops out at 4,000 feet. Any visual moisture is usually in the form of snow. Although it was unseasonably warm this day, we expected the temperature to dip below the freezing level as the night wore on.

Soon after we were airborne, the VFR pattern closed because of weather. I requested multiple approaches to complete our monthly landing requirements. We went IMC at 800 feet and remained so until we descended on final. It couldn’t get any better than this: first little taste

of “A” time and great training to boot. The OAT gauge indicated we were at or slightly below freezing.

On our third approach of the night, an intense flash lit up the entire flight station. All four crew members were in the flight station and were blinded four to five seconds. Our first thought was, “Holy cow,” or words to that effect, as we tried to get our night vision back. I backed up the other pilot as he tried to control the plane while we regained our focus, literally.

I contacted Misawa METRO and asked if they were anticipating any lightning. They said it was impossible for lightning to exist because the cloud tops weren’t high enough. I told them it actually was quite possible. My burned corneas were proof enough for me.

Our next concern was whether we had been hit. We felt no changes in flight characteristics, and the instruments appeared to be operating normally. I talked it over with the flight engineer and the copilot, then called base to inform them we may have been struck by lightning.

Maintenance told me that a lightning-strike inspection lasts about two hours. Talk about bursting my bubble—reluctantly, I told my copilot,



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“Let’s make this one a full stop.” I would have to choke down my point-eight hours of “A” time and like it.

Once I got the plane on deck, maintenance found evidence of a lightning strike. The lightning entry point left a quarter-sized hole in the left wing tip. The exit took off a “V” shaped piece from the left horizontal stabilizer. Two static wicks also were charred.

As it turns out, the conditions were perfect for us to have built up our own static discharge.

Flying in the clouds, warm air over cold air, and at the freezing level, we became a lightning rod. I vaguely remember learning this in those METRO classes during API. While I brain dumped that info a while ago, I’ll never forget it after having been blinded by the light.

The XO was waiting for me when I brought the keys to pop’s car back to maintenance. He said I made the right decision to bring the plane back and laughed about my perfect timing. 

Lt. Perez flies with VP-40.