

# Birds *Always* Turn Away, Right?

by LCdr. William Blacklidge

I scheduled myself for a two-plane low-level over central Florida to get out of the office and out from under the ever-present spotlight that skippers tend to blaze upon poor, defenseless Ops O's like myself. As an Air Combat Training Curriculum (ACTC) Level 5 instructor, I was giving my pilot a check flight for his Level 3 qual. My wingman was an experienced lieutenant commander, also a Level 5 Instructor, who was getting an "X" for his NFO. The weather was excellent. It looked like it was going to be a good day to fly around in the trusty War Hoover.

My pilot did his homework, and the brief and preflight procedures went well. He thoroughly described the route, including entry-point procedures and known restrictions (a hard altitude of 700 AGL for the first leg). As a routine part of the brief, we also covered the topic of avoiding bird. Too bad the birds didn't get the same brief.

En route IFR procedures went as planned, and we cancelled with ATC and descended to the low-level entry point as a section. Acquiring the entry point a little late, my pilot decided he wanted to circle to get a better lead-in to the point as a section. This was fateful decision #1.

We came back around and reacquired the entry point. We lined up, pushed our wingman out in a spread, verified airspeed and altitude, and hit the first point. As we crossed the first point, I once again verified 700 feet AGL. I described expected landmarks on the first leg from the chart and my previous experiences on this route.

After we hit the entry point, I saw a few birds and filed that info into the "same old stuff" brain slot. That was fateful decision #2. After all of 20 seconds on the route, I noticed one lone speck in the distance, just floating around in the breeze. I casually remarked, "Bird centerline, on the horizon." My pilot didn't respond. I figured we had plenty of time. The bird had to be pretty far off, and it had to be big if I could see it already. The bird appeared to move slightly left, so it looked like we'd pass left-to-left. But as

we closed the growing speck, two things suddenly struck me: it was a big bird, and it seemed to be moving back toward us. "Bird, high left," I announced.

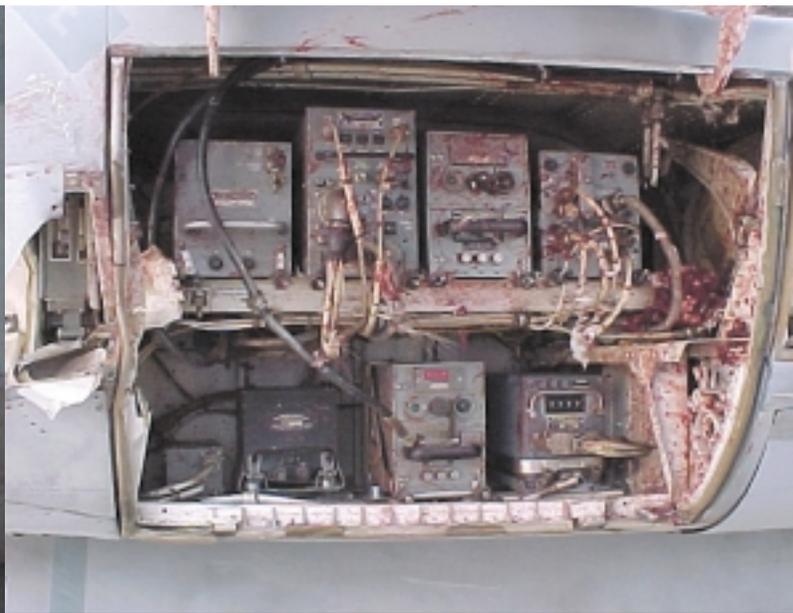
Suddenly, the bird zoomed, tucked and dove right at us with a vector straight for the cockpit. "Bird! Bird! Bird!" When the captain of the Titanic saw that big iceberg, he knew there was no way to avoid it, but he tried anyway. So did we. My pilot acquired the kamikaze on final and immediately pitched the nose up, just as the left side of the canopy offered an extreme close-up of a large Florida turkey buzzard, moving left to right and descending.

Boom! We felt the impact, and just as quickly, we realized the cockpit was intact. We climbed and checked the instruments, feeling a slight vibration and hearing a loud rumbling.

As we were climbing out, I realized my right hand was so firmly wrapped around the lower ejection handle that I had to peel it off with my other hand.

I radioed my wingman and asked him to check us out. He told us we had a "large hole" in the lower left section of the radome, with debris hanging out. He had seen something hit us but did not know what it was. We discussed the situation, location (south of Orlando) and options. Deciding to turn east, we contacted Orlando Approach and asked for clearance for an over-water profile back to Jacksonville. The aircraft was controllable, it had two good engines, and homeplate was our best option. However, the radome is attached to the Viking by four latches, and given the structural damage, we wanted to minimize the chances that it would fall off over land. Orlando Approach cleared us and relayed to Jacksonville Approach that we'd be declaring an emergency once we were ready to make an approach to NAS Jacksonville from the warning area.

Heading north over water, our wingman provided escort and support while we discussed this not-in-NATOPS situation. The vibrations were slight, and the



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intensity of the rumbling seemed to be associated with our airspeed. Since the visible damage was very close to the nose wheelwell, our wingman suggested we put down our gear once we were comfortably close to Jacksonville. We dirtied up at altitude, got a good “three down and locked” indication, checked controllability, and got a thorough, visual inspection from our wingman.

We declared an emergency and started a visual approach, with a flight path that minimized the amount of time we spent flying over populated areas. We were worried that a change of airflow in the dirty configuration might cause the radome to fall off, or make some of the debris fall out of the hole and FOD an engine. We requested an arrested landing on Runway 27 with an LSO on station. My pilot made a perfect approach and arrestment to the short-field gear. As soon as the aircraft stopped, the crash crews signaled for us to immediately shut down both engines—apparently, some debris fell out of the radome hole as we decelerated in the wire. We were then ungloriously towed back to the hangar, where a large crowd just stared and pointed at the nose of our aircraft.

I soon saw the reason for the quick shutdown and all the gawking. The whole lower left quadrant of the radome

was gone, and a lot of structural components were bent or missing. The radar blanket was shredded, and wires were dangling. The whole area and two avionics bays were coated with large chunks of buzzard, with the largest remnants embedded in the FLIR components. If the bird did that to metal, imagine what it would have done to the cockpit and to us.

As we debriefed this good-deal flight, I thought about what we could have changed to prevent the birdstrike. We followed procedures and had intended to fly the route in a conservative manner. Should I have grabbed the controls in close? Should I have directed a course change to steer clear of the bird? The fact is that I was comfortable with the bird “on the horizon” and showing an opening profile. I didn’t insist that my pilot confirm that he’d seen the bird. Once it was in close and became a threat, we didn’t have time to react quickly enough. I’ve flown so many low-levels in the Southeast that I’ve gotten used to birds. I wasn’t prepared for a bird that was actually going to steer at me and not away from me. I think I prefer the Skipper’s ops-officer spotlight against any more good deals like that. 🇺🇸

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