

Things That Go Bump in the Night

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By Cdr. Tom Lalor

Do you remember that opening scene in the classic movie “Twelve O’Clock High,” where the old guy with the spectacles rides his bike into an overgrown English airfield that used to be his B-17 base during World War II? As he stops and looks around, a faint echo of the old sounds of life in the 8th Air Force gradually fills his ears. I learned how that old guy felt, when I recently flew back to Nellis AFB for the first time in almost 10 years. However, my memories, though just as vivid, are from one tragic night there.

Crossing the desert at altitude, it you easily can spot Las Vegas. From more than 100 miles away, the million-watt column of light from one of the casinos pierces the night sky like a beacon. The Luxor was not built 10 years ago, but the beacon of what seemed like dozens of USAF crash and rescue vehicles that marked runway 21L was no less mistakable.

We were in the middle of a good-deal, weeklong, six-plane, A-6E detachment to Nellis, supporting early AMRAAM testing. Always a thinking man, our Ops O had set it up so everyone would get max flight time while still having plenty of opportunity to “roll the bones” in town. I was in the sweet spot of a JO’s career: several hundred hours in the Intruder and crewed with a senior JO bombardier-navigator who was money in the cockpit. We were scheduled to lead a section on a low-level, terrain-following mission as part of a night strike into the Nellis ranges. Well-rested and eager to go, we knew this was going to be good. We were employing the A-6 at its best, with the MO and the XO as his BN on our wing.

The overall brief for everyone ran long because of all the admin stuff, such as training rules and SPINS, which had to be covered. As a result, our section had just a few extra minutes to run through details once the large gaggle split up. Among other items, we quickly discussed NVG procedures because Dash 2 would be using them. My BN and I were not yet low-altitude qualified and had to do it the hard way. When the subject of aircraft lighting came up, the MO told us to turn off all the lights once we pushed out on our low-level. Once any aircraft was “shot down,” they were supposed to kill-remove by turning on all external lights and departing the problem. Beyond that, we did not cover the specifics of lighting, particularly for the rendezvous portion of our hop.

We took off just as the sun was setting, and, by the time “fight’s on” was called, the rugged peaks of the southern Nevada desert were pitch black. Our time came to descend, and I began to ease the old Intruder down. Funny how hard it is to push the stick forward to descend into the dark abyss when you know there’s cumulo-granite just a few hundred feet below.

The MO, a veteran of almost 200 hours of NVG time, followed us into the blackness. Not feeling sure he comfortably could fly off us, using only the glow of our exhausts as a visual cue, I left on the switch to the little, white taillight. Approaching the IP, we thought we had it made when the voice of “God” called us dead and told us to egress. Our wingmen pressed on, apparently spared the simulated AMRAAM shot from an unseen

F-15C. We turned on our lights and flew to our rendezvous point with our tails between our legs to wait for Dash 2 to join us.

We orbited at 14,000 feet and heard Dash 2 call “off-target.” We eventually spotted him as he approached for the rejoin and the trip back. Dash 2 crossed in front of our nose from right to left and started a hard left turn to complete their rendezvous. As we neared the course back to Nellis, we rolled out of the left turn, set 250 knots, and told Dash 2 to pick up a running rendezvous. The XO acknowledged my BN’s call, and I observed their lights deep over my left shoulder as they rolled out in trail.

I waited until they were stabilized at about the same tac-wing position they had on the low-level, which was about 1,500 feet aft. I again secured all our lights, except the green strip lights and the white taillight. With things apparently suitcased and ready for the return leg, we turned our attention to checking out with Nellis range control and making our way back for a few cold ones at the blackjack table.

About 15 seconds later, a violent bang brutally interrupted our tranquility, followed by a momentary pitch nose-down and a whoom as the engines surged. My initial

thought was that we had smacked the top of one of the peaks. I quickly ruled out that thought when I recalled nothing in the area reached as high as 14,000 feet. In that instant, we came to

the horrible conclusion our wingmen had collided with us. As my BN exclaimed over the ICS, “Oh my God, they just hit us!”

I gently rolled on the right wing to see their stricken aircraft passing underneath, ahead, and to the right of our flight path. A dull, orange fiery glow came from the cockpit area as their Intruder began a slow left roll and steepened its

dive. My BN called out for the crew to eject, but it fell on deaf ears, because the underside of our fuselage had sliced off most of their cockpit. A few seconds later, the desert floor lit up in a brilliant yellow and orange explosion, as the aircraft hit, going almost straight down at 500 knots, with no apparent ejection attempt.

As the BN got out the Mayday call and started the SAR effort for the other jet, I inventoried the condition of our aircraft. It still was flying good and had no major controllability issues. I scanned the instruments and saw we had lost our combined hydraulics. Some of the lines must have been cut. Fortunately, we still had the flight-hydraulics side to power the flight controls. We took out the PCL and started going through the procedures for lost hydraulics.

A combined-hydraulic failure in the A-6 meant we had to blow down the gear and electrically lower the flaps. We debated moving the flaps at all, since neither of us knew if the wings had been hit. On the other hand, I feared some of our horizontal stabilizer might be damaged, giving us reduced authority in the dirty configuration. We elected to run the flaps down electrically until we felt any degradation in control. Fortunately, they came down just fine. As we slowed to do a controllability check, I needed almost the entire amount of available up trim to hold the jet level, but things still were manageable.

We had no problem finding the field as we turned our attention to our final approach at Nellis. The flashing emergency lights lining either side of the runway made it stick out like a sore thumb, even against the background of the brightly lit Vegas skyline. We put down the hook, and took an uneventful short-field arrestment. Once the aircraft was shut down, I cracked the canopy a couple of inches with the remaining hydraulic pressure. I heard the crash-and-rescue chief standing at my boarding ladder exclaim in a classic Southern drawl, “Sir, you oughtta see what happened to this here airplane. I don’t know how you got it back.”

Once on the ground, we saw what he was talking about. Half the port stab had been sliced off, and the port aft side of the fuselage had



extensive damage, including an indentation of the wingmen's refueling probe on our aircraft's skin. A piece of the BN's headrest later was found lodged in our fuselage. The engineers said it was a miracle the tailhook didn't pull out of the



fuselage on the trap—it probably would have on a carrier arrestment. Fortunately, the bulkhead, on which the hook mounts, took most of our wingmen's impact. A hit any other place likely would have taken off the tail. As it was, our A-6 sustained strike damage.

Two lives and two aircraft later, what did we learn? Among other things, we relearned some hard lessons about briefing and flying with NVGs, flight-crew coordination, and adherence to SOP.

We spent too much time occupied with the big-picture strike brief. We did not allow time to discuss one of the most important aspects of the mission: how we were going to fly an NVG section without hitting each other. In absence of any other guidance from our wingmen, we assumed they wanted our lighting configuration the same way it had been set before we kill-removed. With no discussion on rendezvous lighting, I just did what made sense at the time. Had we taken 30 more seconds to brief the NVG rendezvous, this midair never would have happened.

Even though I was told to be lights-out on the low-level, I elected to turn on the white taillight for a warm fuzzy—without telling our

wingmen I was doing it. They did not object at the time, and I found out later the reason why: The bulb filament had broken, and the light wasn't working. I left the green-formation lights on for the rendezvous as well, but from the deep, 7 o'clock, stepped-down position, it was unlikely they would have seen the strip lights, either. As a result, I assumed our aircraft was better lit during the rendezvous than it really was. Had our flight coordination and communication been better, our wingmen would have been able to clue us in that our jet nearly was invisible from behind.

Another lesson we relearned was why we have an SOP. Our squadron's maximum allowed closure during running rendezvous was 50 knots. The TACT's pod our wingmen were carrying had them hitting us at 350

knots, or 100 knots of closure. Those who have flown NVGs know how hard it can be to judge distances away from lighted aircraft. Assuming they expected our airplane to be lit completely, it is possible they fixated on someone else, thinking it was us. Frustrated with their inability to close the big distance, they sped up to expedite the rendezvous. In the TACT's reconstruction, it was apparent the MO saw our aircraft at the last instant and tried in vain to stuff the nose, then pass under us. Had he been going slower, he likely would have had the reaction time to avoid a collision.

I since have flown many hours on night-vision goggles, but I never again have allowed myself to be lulled into a sense of complacency when using them. My flight members and I always leave a brief with a clear understanding of the aircraft-lighting plan for each phase of flight. NVGs are just another sensor—no more. They are not a substitute for a good instrument scan, and they certainly do not turn night into day—even though we sometimes seem to fly as if they do. 🦅

Cdr. Lalor flew A-6Es with VA-34 at the time of this mishap. He is currently the commanding officer of VFA-105.