



by Cdr. Andy Boening

My schedules officer finally let me out of the office to fly a good-deal training hop: a local NATOPS refresher. Flight time in the squadron had been scarce for the month, because of our current schedule. Two of our three airplanes were on detachment. The third had unceremoniously broken the same day the others had left, but things were looking up. Maintenance had found the problem and would have our aircraft ready to go for the next day's trainer. This was my chance to get the required number of hours and landings for the month.

It was a beautiful VFR spring day at NAS Jacksonville as we launched out to Gainesville Regional Airport for a few approaches, followed by several turns in the touch-

and-go pattern. I was crewed up with my SELRES (selected reserve) operations officer in the copilot seat, and one of our new JOs was acting as the crew chief. Our flight down and back went smoothly. On our final approach to landing back at NAS Jacksonville, the excitement began.

During a touch-and-go at the end of a PAR approach, I noted a P-3 taxiing to the hold short line at the departure end of the active runway (RWY 27). I didn't pay much attention to it until the aircrew started coordinating with tower for an opposite-direction, VFR takeoff from RWY 09 into the local pattern. The next call from tower was for us. "JV Zero-Five-Zero, need you to full stop on your next pass."

My first thought was, "Did we miss the NOTAM for a P-3 air show practice period?" I still needed one more



touch-and-go and a full stop to finish up my currency requirements for the flight. I asked tower if we could squeeze in one more landing. After a slight pause, they approved my request. Their new game plan would be to launch the P-3 opposite direction during our downwind leg prior to our full stop. No problem! I would get my last landing, and our VP brethren would get airborne a little faster.

Then I started to question the plan. “Why do we need to launch airplanes in opposite directions during normal field operations?” I wondered. I didn’t pass on my thoughts to my crew or the tower controllers.

The tower’s plan seemed to work. The P-3 launched and made a left turnout from RWY 09 as we turned to a left downwind for RWY 27. As I understood from listening to their conversations with tower, the P-3 was going to depart the pattern to setup for a flyby, which would be timed to happen after we landed.

We moved our attention back to completing the pattern-go-around checklist and made a normal abeam call for landing. The controller responded, “Cleared to land number two. Follow a P-3 on a five-mile final for a full stop on runway 27.” I held the final flap setting and flew an extended downwind to give us enough room to land behind the full stop (not the airshow P-3, another P-3).

Then things started to get even more interesting. Coming through the 90, I picked up a visual on the airshow P-3, which was approaching from the opposite direction for their flyby. The time it had taken to land a second unplanned aircraft had now messed up the timing for the event. I remember saying, “Boy this is stupid.” I could tell we were going to have to land in a hurry before the flyby P-3 met us at the merge. None of us reacted to my observation. It hit me that I had been so fixated on the other two aircraft that I had forgotten to call for the final flap setting or complete the landing checklist. We hurriedly configured the aircraft and finished the checks.

So there we were, turning short final, with the landing P-3 just touching down and the flyby P-3 descending and accelerating (smoking more than usual) toward us at warp factor 9. Just as I thought everything was going to work out, the craziest thing happened. The events of the next

few seconds could not have been timed or performed better by the Blue Angels.

The landing P-3 cleared the runway as two new players entered from stage left: two buses, which had been holding for the P-3 to land, had been cleared by the ground controller to cross the runway prior to our landing. The first bus hurried across the runway, followed closely by the second. The second bus driver saw us on very short final and did what any smart driver should do in this situation: he stopped right in the middle of the runway. Then the air show started.

I immediately initiated an in-close, foul-deck waveoff, as the tower controller started yelling for us to go around. The waveoff lights were flashing. The next sound was the TCAS (traffic alert and collision avoidance system) calling a resolution alert: “Descend, descend now, descend, descend now!” as I looked up to see the P-3 in perfect position for a right-to-right, knife-edge pass. Some JOs on the ground later told me that it was a perfectly timed airshow maneuver. We met, making hard left turns at co-altitude within several hundred feet of each other. My copilot, an ex-Hornet driver, capped off the moment by calling, “Fight’s on.”

Postflight debrief revealed that the two buses were carrying the base CO and a City of Jacksonville delegation on a facilities tour. I’m sure the ground controller felt some pressure to hustle them across the runway. The driver of the second bus stopped because only the lead bus was in communication with the ground controller. He had been happily following the lead bus until he saw us bearing down on him. The airshow P-3 was piloted by the squadron CO. He was doing a flyby for a group of underprivileged children that his squadron was hosting that day.

I’m sure both groups were impressed that the Navy was able to coordinate such an impressive flyby. But things could have gone terribly wrong if I had mistakenly turned right instead of left on our waveoff. The CNN news flash would have said, “City of Jacksonville delegation killed in midair collision of Navy C-9 and P-3 over the NAS Jacksonville runway... more information at the top of the hour.”

This close call didn’t have to happen. I had correctly identified and assessed the hazard (yes, this old guy knows the ORM lingo)... I just didn’t let my experience help me make the right risk decision.

But we did look good! 

Cdr. Boeing flies C-9B and DC-9 aircraft with VR-58.