

by Lt. Pete Gortner

How can disaster strike so quickly? In less than five seconds, you can go from situation normal to barely cheating death. Here's how it happened to me.

The event was a night section flight of Prowlers, flying out of NAF El Centro. It was an FRS syllabus event; I was taking up a Marine student pilot as wingman, while in the lead jet were an FRS instructor pilot (IP) and a squadron PXO, who was in the right seat finishing up his syllabus events. It is common procedure for the FRS to operate out of El Centro with front-seat aircrew only, so there were only four of us in the flight.

We briefed individual takeoffs, a rendezvous in the MOA, night parade and cruise formation, break-up and rendezvous section approaches, and emergencies. We were sharing the MOA with another section of Prowlers, but their MOA time ended right when ours started.

Our EA-6B took off three minutes after the lead jet. The other section was delayed and was supposed to take off sometime after us. So much for our MOA deconfliction.

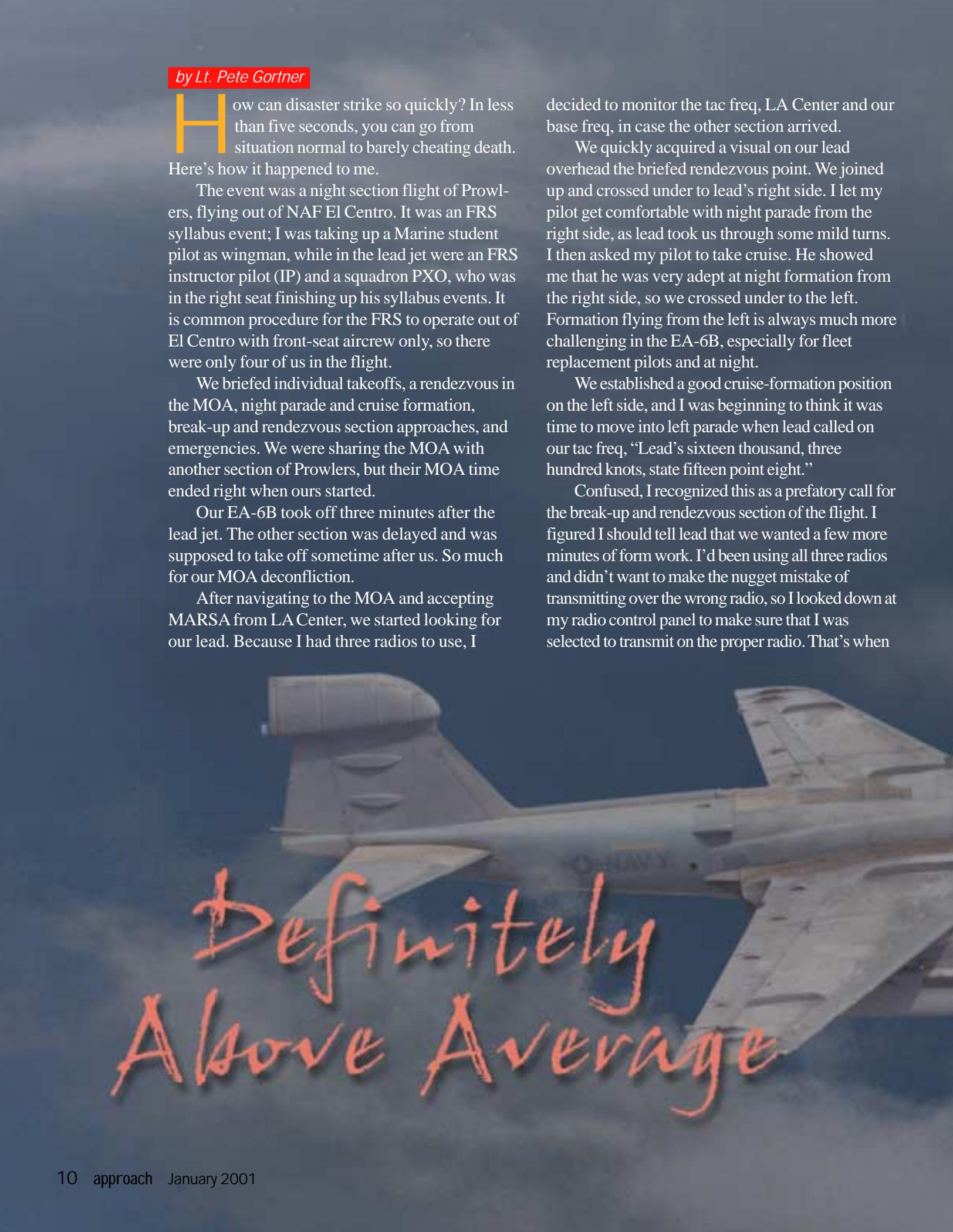
After navigating to the MOA and accepting MARSAs from LA Center, we started looking for our lead. Because I had three radios to use, I

decided to monitor the tac freq, LA Center and our base freq, in case the other section arrived.

We quickly acquired a visual on our lead overhead the briefed rendezvous point. We joined up and crossed under to lead's right side. I let my pilot get comfortable with night parade from the right side, as lead took us through some mild turns. I then asked my pilot to take cruise. He showed me that he was very adept at night formation from the right side, so we crossed under to the left. Formation flying from the left is always much more challenging in the EA-6B, especially for fleet replacement pilots and at night.

We established a good cruise-formation position on the left side, and I was beginning to think it was time to move into left parade when lead called on our tac freq, "Lead's sixteen thousand, three hundred knots, state fifteen point eight."

Confused, I recognized this as a prefatory call for the break-up and rendezvous section of the flight. I figured I should tell lead that we wanted a few more minutes of form work. I'd been using all three radios and didn't want to make the nugget mistake of transmitting over the wrong radio, so I looked down at my radio control panel to make sure that I was selected to transmit on the proper radio. That's when



Definitely
Above Average



Photo-composite illustration by Allan Amen

I felt the plane violently lurch. I instantly looked up to see the planform on the lead aircraft (which was breaking left), covering up my entire windshield and half of the canopy! I was sure that we were going to collide. In another half-second, lead had passed to the left. We were still flying.

I couldn't believe it—our lead had turned into us! An astute student pilot had saved us. I'm glad we were in parade formation instead of cruise, because if we hadn't been, lead surely would have smashed into us. The violent lurch I felt when I was heads down was my pilot shoving the stick into the instrument panel when he saw lead's anti-collision lights come on. This all happened in just two or three seconds.

In the debrief, we learned that lead, who was concentrating on instruments to provide a stable lead platform, hadn't seen us cross under to the left side. Assuming that we were still on the right, he broke left.

Next time, I won't care what radio I transmit on. When it's time-critical, make safety-of-flight transmissions over whatever frequency you can. Remember that at any time, your condition can go from completely normal to terrifying in mere seconds. By the way, my student earned an "above average" for situational awareness. 🦅

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