

# Speechless

by Lt. Anthony Bilotti

It was a beautiful day for blue-water operations near the equator: a scattered layer at 2,000 feet and isolated build-ups in the vicinity. The mission was to bomb and strafe the ship's spar, basically a huge piece of wood towed 800 feet behind the aircraft carrier. With two cruise-experienced JOs flying, the hop was destined to be a rage-ex. I was looking forward to a quick coordination brief, some great bombing and strafing, maybe a fly-by, an OK 3-wire, and taco Tuesday for chow.

As I was sitting on the catapult waiting to launch, I noticed the weather changing. That wasn't a big deal—the ship always seemed to find weather for launches and recoveries. I launched before my lead, climbed overhead to our squadron's holding altitude, and waited for him. After joining, we commenced runs on the spar and climbed back to altitude to await our recovery. As we held overhead, I noticed towering cumulus build-ups within several miles of the ship. The weather was CAVU outside this area. What was expected to be a Case I recovery was now Case II. So much for the extra gas we were going to use for a fly-by.

We received our marshal instructions and descended from high holding to the marshal stack. My flight lead had planned to push from high holding to our marshal-stack altitude and position with about a minute of holding until our push for the ship. However, just after arriving in the stack we heard, "Ninety-nine, stand by new EATs." We held at 9,000 feet and waited for our new push time. Our marshal radial now seemed to be right in the middle of the cumulus build-ups. My lead did a good job weaving between the build-ups to maintain position and interval in the stack.

A couple of minutes before our EAT, my lead began a left turn back toward the ship to maintain timing, which would bring us through what appeared to be a small build-up. "Sorry to drag you through some clouds, but I have to for timing," he said. At that moment, I was on my lead's left side with my mask off. I considered putting on my mask, but I was a salty, second-cruise guy.

I had flown formation in the nastiest weather, day and night, and the build-up we were going to penetrate didn't look that bad. I tightened up into parade, ready to suck some LAU. We penetrated the weather at about a 30-degree left angle of bank. At first it wasn't bad, but after about 15 seconds, it started to get darker, and the clouds thickened. The hairs on the back of my neck were standing up, and the little devil on my shoulder was laughing at me. I tightened up into Blue Angels parade and still had trouble seeing my lead. I quickly developed vertigo. We were still in a 30-degree angle of bank turn to the left, but my senses were telling me I was straight and level. There was no time to take my hands off the controls to put on my mask.

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I wrongly figured that it would start clearing up quickly since the cumulus build-up didn't look too thick. The heavy rain turned into a thin sheet of ice on the forward part of the canopy. We were still in a left turn, I could not see my lead's jet, and, with



Photo-composite by Patricia Eaton

my mask off, I had no way of communicating that to him. Since my vertigo was telling me I was straight and level, I immediately pushed the stick into the DDI (I even heard a little AOA tone), rolled wings level, put on my mask and began de-conflicting altitudes and headings with my lead. About a minute had elapsed since we had entered the “insignificant” weather.

This experience taught me three lessons. First, avoid cumulus build-ups. Second, remember the basics and have a way out if you lose sight of your wingman. Third, and most important, no matter how salty you think you are, always adhere to OPNAV 3710.7R, paragraph 8.2.4.3: “Tactical jets—O<sub>2</sub> shall be used by all occupants from takeoff to landing.” 

Lt. Bilotti flies with VFA-151.