

Circular Rainbow

It was in 1974. I was a 25-year old second lieutenant, fresh out of A-7 school, assigned to the 355th Tactical Fighter Squadron at Myrtle Beach Air Force Base, South Carolina. It was a dark, dreary, rainy day when I was assigned to fly as number four of a four-ship training mission. The line truck pulled up next to the flight leader's A-7 and he got out, then on to number two's airplane, then Three's. Lastly it pulled up to my airplane. I hustled out and immediately got under the wing to get out of the rain. I did my preflight walk-around inspection from underneath the airplane as much as possible, but by the time I opened the canopy and climbed in I was damp. The dark day was enough to put anyone in a "low" mood.

Engine start was normal. I closed the canopy to keep out the rain, at the expense of the cockpit gradually getting warmer and more humid. I couldn't wait to get airborne so the air conditioning system could dehumidify and cool the air in there. I taxied out in trail of the first three aircraft, moving along in the mist of their three exhausts thrown up from the damp pavement. Into the arming area where the pins were removed from our landing gear and practice bombs, and then onto the runway. Lead lined up just left of the centerline, number two a few feet off his left wingtip, number three a few feet off Lead's right wingtip, and I lined up a few feet off number three's right wingtip, with about 20' of runway remaining off to my right. Lead twirled his finger next to his head to signal engine run-up.

Power to 80%, all gauges looked good, number three looked at me and I gave a thumbs up. I saw Three give Lead a thumbs up; then Lead released brakes and began his takeoff roll. Since shortly after takeoff we were initially going to climb up into the clouds, "into the soup", we were going to each takeoff separately, 20 seconds apart, which would put us several miles in trail with each other. Twenty seconds later Two began his takeoff roll, then Three. Now alone on the runway, I hacked my clock and watched the seconds tick by as Three disappeared ahead of me in the mist. Twenty seconds, I released brakes, advanced my throttle to "mil", our word for full power, and began to roll. The thousand-foot marker flashed by, I'd reached the preplanned check speed and all engine gauges showed normal so I continued, gently steering by my feet on the rudder pedals toward the center of the runway, its dashed lines now becoming a blur beneath my airplane's nose. At 155 knots I pulled the control stick back slightly and the nose started coming up. I applied more back-stick raising the nose further, and at about 10 degrees nose high I felt myself lift off. I held the nose there, checked engine instruments again, all good, and reached forward with my left hand to raise the gear lever. Speed now passing 200, I waited for the three gear lights to go out indicating the gear was up and locked. Simultaneously I brought my attention back inside the cockpit, fixing my gaze on the flight instruments, transitioning to instrument flying. Now everything in front of me was dark grey, rainy cloud. The gear completed its cycle, up and locked, just as I entered the soup.

At 250 knots I pulled the power back to maintain that speed below 10,000 feet, and with my thumb rotated a little wheel on my throttle to tilt my radar dish up a bit. Since the radar beam was now pointing at the sky, the ground clutter disappeared from the radar scope situated between my knees. I watched the radar sweep across the now-darkened scope and within seconds saw the three dots of the other planes in the formation. Two called passing 10,000' and his blip on the scope appeared to converge on Lead's as he accelerated above 250 knots match Lead who was now climbing at 300 knots. At 18,000 feet lead called, "in the clear," so I knew I'd break out of the clouds about then and be able to transition from radar trail, holding my in-trail position using the radar, to a visual rejoin with the formation. Until then I flew the preplanned departure route.

When the formation was holding the same heading the three were on the radar in the center upper part of the scope. As I watched lead came to a turn point. His radar blip began moving to the side while I held the original heading until I reached that same point in space. By that time lead was off the scope, two, who had turned about 20 seconds after Lead, was near the edge, and three's radar return was half-way off the scope to the side. I reached the turn point and went to 30 degrees of bank on the Attitude Director Indicator (ADI), always maintaining preplanned climb pitch and speed of 250 knots. As I turned all three blips slid back toward the center and when I rolled out on the new heading all three were again on the scope's centerline.

Passing 10,000' I pushed the power back to mil and accelerated to 350 knots. Passing 16,000 feet the darkness began to lighten a bit. I avoided the temptation to stare out the window and continued to fly instruments, keeping them reading precisely what they were supposed to read. As I'd been trained at Columbus AFB, even one degree off was off, not on; so if my pitch on the

ADI was 11 degrees, I eased it down to 10. If my heading was 1 degree off the planned heading,

I corrected it. Passing 17,000 the clouds before me became more and more wispy, and about 18,000 feet I climbed into clear air. I looked down and reset my altimeter to standard barometric pressure, 29.92 millibars, the altimeter setting everyone flying about 18,000 feet used, and looked out the window. On both sides a short distance away were walls of dark clouds towering well above. Below was the solid cloud deck I had just exited. Lead had maneuvered us into a sort of canyon of clear air between much higher, dense clouds.

Upward in front of me through this canyon I could see the three small dots of the other flight members. Two had already joined on Lead's left wing, and Three was fairly close. Further upward beyond Lead was the dark blue of clear high-altitude air. The sun was off to the side, hidden by those high clouds, but its rays cut across the canyon, illuminating the mist around the formation with brilliant rays of color.

I accelerated to 450 knots and began rapidly closing on the formation. I could see Three now maneuvering into position on

Lead's right wing. Lead called a fuel check and I answered in turn. Now about a mile back, I was approaching the formation with about 100 knots of overtake speed. With about 3000 feet to go I eased the throttle back, my speed decelerating through 430, 410, 400. I knew lead was holding 350 and that at this altitude I could dump 50 knots in about 5 seconds using idle and boards. By "boards" I mean my speedbrake, a large panel that extends from the fuselage when I activate a switch on the throttle. Close now, the three-ship formation rapidly swelling in my vision, I pulled the power to idle and opened the speedbrake. The deceleration was immediate and strong, shifting my torso forward in the seat. No sooner had I extended the speedbrake than I retracted it and pushed the throttle up to about 82%, approximately what I'll need at this altitude for 350 knots. My control stick made a hundred tiny movements correcting my jet's position as I settled into formation a few feet off Three's right wing.

A few seconds later Lead gently fishtailed his airplane, lightly wiggling his rudder back and forth, indicating we should each drift out to "route" formation, with wider spacing, about 20' apart or so. Out in route I saw Lead give Two and Three some sort of hand signal, but I couldn't figure out what it was. No matter, Three will relay it to me. Sure enough, he turned to me and pointed downward, sort of beneath his airplane. I looked down that way and immediately saw, with great delight, what Lead was pointing out to us. Beneath us was that canyon of clear, mist-threaded air between those dark towering cloud

masses. At the bottom of the canyon, down at 18,000' was that dark, angry, rain-drenched cloud deck. Illuminating the clear but misty air of the canyon were the sun's rays. And down there, in the mist, against that dark dismal background, was a brilliantly lit rainbow. Except it wasn't a rainbow, it was a perfectly round circle of rainbow colors.

God was reminding me that down below, on that dark dismal rainy morning, there still existed His glory, His sunlight, His "rain-circle". The heavens do indeed declare the glory of God.