

CU NIMS - TROUBLE PLUS

"The 2015 Report on the Air Asia RPT disaster is sadly reminiscent of other disastrous decisions made by pilots not recognising the power of extreme tropical weather. Although it does seem odd that any high altitude commercial pilot with the claimed tropical experience of this pair would make the fundamental mistake of trying to CLIMB ABOVE ITCZ thunderstorms at the peak of the monsoon season (when I've seen them reach 70,000 feet!), that's what they apparently got air traffic permission to do. The greatest risk in penetrating these monstrous cumulonimbus giants is near their top 'anvil', where they can tear an aircraft apart. The only way to penetrate a line of them is to use weather radar to divert left or right to the area of least precipitation on the wx radar - or to turn back, in extremis.



Ubun - photograph Bob Richardson

In 1964 I was one of a pair of our 77 Squadron Sabre fighters near RAAF Butterworth/Penang during the wet season, with my CO Wg Cdr V B Cannon DFC, doing practice radar controlled intercepts on each other. It was a clear, fine sunny day, except for one isolated large thunderstorm with its spectacular anvil top about 3000 feet above our cruising level of 38,000 feet. My CO was being radar vectored to a 90 degree intercept on me, and we were each leaving a clear contrail, so I observed him about 20 miles heading directly towards the CB (which of course the radar operator couldn't see in those days.)

I watched him enter just below the anvil, but his contrail didn't emerge a few miles across the cloud 30 seconds later! So I called him, and got no response. I called again, and so did the radar operator. Eventually a very shaky voice responded that he had lost control of the Sabre, and had 'recovered at Angels 20', 20,000 feet altitude and miles below me. We eventually re-joined and returned to Butterworth, where the wing commander told me the Sabre had been tossed around like a cork, ending up supersonic in a dive, and the airframe g limits had been exceeded - although no apparent damage resulted.

We all treated tropical 'Cu Nims' with a great deal of respect after that, especially when flying at night without any weather radar.... Bob Richardson