

The Wily Band

By Capt. Greg Mavor, USMC

I was a nugget and just had finished my first Combined Armed Exercise in 29 Palms, Calif. Up to that point, most of my flights had been air-to-ground sorties, with a few air-to-air training codes mixed in.

We began our air-to-air training block with the walk-before-you-run mentality. The 1 v 1 training started with flats and rollers, then offensive and defensive maneuvers, followed by category fights. The training ended with a fighter pilot's favorite: Cat. 4 butterfly-neutral sets. After a week of 1 v 1s, we began 2 v 2 training. Again, we took the walk-before-you-run approach: We started with VIDs and ended with trying to kill some bandits. We began our last week of training with 4 v 4s against Vipers from South Carolina.

An incident reminded me of a story a teacher had told me, summing up aircraft mishaps. When an aviator begins his flying career, the man upstairs places an unknown amount of pencils in a jar. And each time you have a close call, whether induced by yourself or an outside factor, one of those pencils is taken. When an incident happens down the road, and there aren't any more pencils to be taken, you can guess what happens next. On this day, I felt many pencils had been taken from my jar.

South Carolina was enjoying a beautiful spring day. I kept telling myself, "I can't believe they pay me to do this." Our four ship of Hornets provided red-air presentations to Vipers stationed north of us. The fight would occur in a warning area off the coast. Flight lead did a terrific job in the brief, explaining the maneuvers for us to

simulate threat countertactics.

We would be conducting a VUL period. At the "fights on" call by the fighters (Air Force F-16s), the air-to-air fighting would commence, and it would not stop for a given period. Only a KIO call by a pilot, possibly for an emergency, would stop the exercise.

The takeoff, en-route flight, and G-awareness maneuver went as briefed and were uneventful. We had a positive check-in with the Vipers on the safety-of-flight frequency, and we were ready to play. We pushed off our CAP point in



its

Photo by TSgt. Lance Cheung
Modified



formation. I was Dash 2—ready to lay waste to any Viper in my way. At the action point, we split into two groups; one group flowed east then north, the other flowed west then north. I followed my flight lead throughout the maneuver and placed myself in a position for the visual fight. Shortly after we turned north, there was a kill call on my wingman. One down, three to go for the Air Force F-16s.

My flight lead immediately turned out 90 degrees and exited the flight, flowing south back to CAP. Although angered at the situation, I proceeded, alone and unafraid.

As briefed, I would try to reach their CAP point and simulate a bomb drop. I quickly picked up a contact on radar, and my heart began to race. It was revenge time. With 10 miles to go until the merge, I didn't think they saw me. As I looked outside, I tallied two Vipers, in combat spread, heading south—I'm in. On my roll-in to gain the offensive, I observed a break-turn into

me by both aircraft. We were three miles apart with over 1,000 knots of closure. The Vipers were in a lead-trail formation.

I shot a radar missile on the leader at three miles and transitioned to the wingman. I merged with the leader, high-to-low, with me as the high fighter. I saw him start a right-hand turn, level with the horizon. I took my eyes off him and padlocked his wingman, looking to make a safe pass. I leveled my wings and stated my intentions of what I thought was going to be a left-to-left pass. I realized we were on a collision course and took evasive action, maneuvering low and left.

It looked like we passed about 250 feet apart—less than 500 feet is considered a near-midair. There was a kill call shortly afterward, on what I believed was me, from the first fighter I merged with. I rogered the call and went back to CAP with my heart racing from that close pass. It must have taken 15 minutes for me to calm down.

What caused the near-midair? As I passed the first Viper I had merged with, I assumed the wingman had me in sight because of the break turn and how his aircraft was pointed. I later learned in the debrief he did not have a tally on me but just was following his lead. Bad on me for assuming he had sight; this is a training-rule violation on my part. I leveled my wings and stated my intentions for a left-to-left pass. This plan did not work because the Viper followed his wingman without sight of me and checked right, which put us on a collision course.

Air-to-air combat is dangerous. My goal was to shoot and kill as many Vipers as possible. I'm sure it was the Viper pilot's goal to get a kill as well. Hazards can occur when both pilots have that mind state; you can expect having closer-than-normal passes and being out of position. Flying 4 v 4, air-to-air, or large-force exercises are some of the most dangerous events. Be safe, but don't lose the edge. 

Capt. Mavor flies with VMFA-312.