



In Over My Head?

By Lt. Gregg Dewaele

Ever get the feeling you were in over your head? That's a bad feeling, but it's the one I had as I prepared to fly into a war zone.

My situation started innocently with a bad case of "been there, done that." Our squadron was at the beginning of a three-month rotation. We were tasked to patrol the Iraqi southern no-fly zone from Prince Sultan Air Base, Saudi Arabia. I had been with the squadron for two years and had deployed to PSAB and to Incirlik, Turkey. This one would be a carbon copy of our last deployment in support of OSW.

When our squadron touched down in Saudi Arabia, the Air Force and our intelligence assets briefed us. We had ample time to study the SPINS and to review our evasion plans and procedures. These are good things to know if the worst-case scenario should present itself—namely, going down in enemy territory.

As the days passed, and my name finally appeared on the flight schedule to make my dramatic return to the box, I neglected to read and prepare as I should have for the coming mission. The morning of the flight started well. The mission and Prowler-specific briefs went as they had a year and a half earlier. My comfort level was high—right where it should not have been.

As we walked into the PR shop, our crew's discussion turned to that worst-case scenario. Right then, a horrifying fact dawned on me: I was not prepared to fly. I was not sure what

I would do if we had to eject. I did not know in what direction to travel if I found myself on the ground in enemy country. I also did not know how to work the GPS or the new radios we had been issued as part of our survival gear. Even if I did know how to use the radio, I wasn't sure of the procedures for getting in touch with the friendly forces that would rescue me. This uneasy feeling got worse as we walked to our jet. I was not as familiar as I should have been with the procedures we were using for check in, taxi, or the departure. I was in the back seat and would not be called upon for this knowledge, but, as a member of the crew, I was responsible.

Fortunately, for my crew and me, my inputs were not needed, and the flight went without a hitch. However, I learned a hard lesson that day, one that I will not soon forget. Take nothing for granted, and study what you need to know for your job. It doesn't matter if you've "been there, done that." Your memory is not as good as you think it is, and some things just are not intuitive.

Even if you are in a multi-place aircraft and don't expect to contribute to certain aspects of the mission, you are part of a crew, and, therefore, you should act accordingly. Know your standard-operating procedures and your aircraft-specific procedures because the life you save may be your own. 

Lt. Dewaele flies with VAQ-134.