

# Rubbin's Racing

By Lt. James McKenna

I had been pumped about flying Tomcats ever since I put it as my first choice out of the training command. Tomcats not only look good in the break, but the F-14 Delta has a Gucci HUD and extremely powerful engines—something I was deprived of while flying the T-2 and T-45A.

I was scheduled for my fifth flight in the FRS and my first time flying form with another Tomcat. My first four flights had gone well, and, being the salty FRS student I now was, I figured flying form is the same—regardless of the aircraft type.

The brief went as expected, and we walked for a normal start-up and taxi. Our briefed “eight sec flight lead separation” takeoff and initial join-up was uneventful and expeditious. I had a HUD with all the great flight information, especially the velocity vector and power carrot, so I found this way of flying much easier than the steam-gauge scan I had used in the training command.

Once in the operating area, the flight continued as briefed. We jumped right into a number of break-ups and rendezvous’ that went smoothly. I was surprised at how easy the

A blue F-14 Tomcat fighter jet is shown from a low angle, positioned on the deck of an aircraft carrier. The jet's two vertical stabilizers are prominent, and the cockpit canopy is visible. The background shows the carrier's deck and the ocean under a clear sky.

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procedures were in this jet, compared to the trainers. At this point in the flight, I started to get complacent. Takeoff, no problem; initial join-up, done; break up and rendezvous, piece of cake—I had begun to think I had this stuff wired. The only things left to do were a section approach, rejoin for a depart, reenter to the break, and a few touch-and-goes for landing training.

The section approach went as briefed. My lead dropped me off on the ball for a touch-and-go while he did a low approach. Off the touch-and-go, I found my lead, joined-up, and he gave me the battle-damage-check signal. While I checked his aircraft, he set up for the section break. Once the battle-damage checks were complete, I slid back into position, gave him a thumbs up, and he passed me the lead.

We still were in a tight section turn, heading back toward the initial. My lead looked over my jet, gave me a thumbs up, and I passed him back the lead. During my transition from lead to wing, I took a small cut away while simultaneously yanking off some power to

slide right into position. I then found out just how big the Tomcat's wings actually are. As I leveled them, my right wingtip "rubbed" his left wingtip. I know "rubbin's racing" in NASCAR and the movies, but I was confident what had happened wasn't something we should have done with two \$60-million-taxpayer assets. Although midair is something we always brief, you just don't ever expect it to happen.

My lead and I knew we had "swapped paint," so we split the flight and separated from each other. My lead landed first, and I came in right behind him—both with visual straight-ins.

Neither aircraft had any real damage. The postflight inspection only showed some scraped paint, and the wingtip lights still worked.

After admitting to maintenance and the squadron what had happened, as well as conducting a thorough debrief, the jet and I were back flying later that night. This time, though, I was quite a bit more humble and sporting a new call sign.

As usual, there are lessons learned. We didn't do controllability checks after we

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touched—we probably should have. We had the gas and the time, and it wouldn't have hurt to be extra cautious. I also learned, for real this time, the meaning of the phrases, "Don't let complacency set in," and, "It ain't over until it's over."*[Isn't that a Yogi Berra quote?—Ed.]* Taking care of the basics is essential to any mission. The flight isn't really over until you're safely on deck, the aircraft is shut down, and you're walking into the hangar.

While "rubbing" may be OK for NASCAR, it's frowned upon in the fighter community. 

Lt. "Rub" McKenna flies with VF-213.



Photo by PHAN Tony Foster