

Crew Resource Management

Situational Awareness

Assertiveness

Decision Making

Communication

Leadership

Adaptability/Flexibility

Mission Analysis



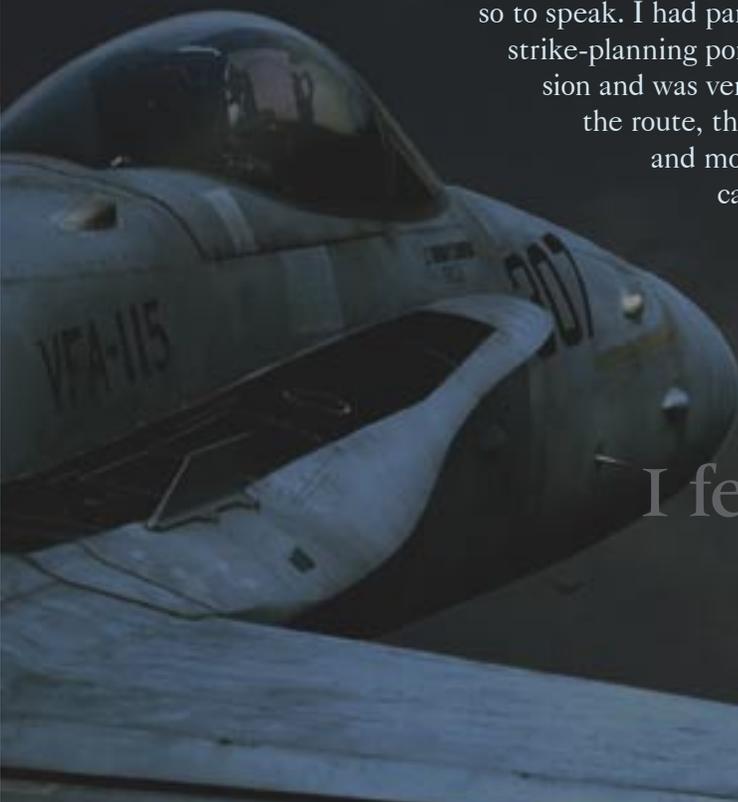
Sandbagging

By Lt. Steve Walborn

The routine of cruise was well-entrenched, and the days were starting to blend together. Missions flown in support of Operation Southern Watch had been going on for some time, and everyday events were becoming mundane. The situation would change quickly, though, with the beginning of Operation Iraqi Freedom.

One night mission forever will live in my memory. The strike took me north to participate in the initial wave of the “shock and awe” campaign. The division that evening consisted of my skipper as lead (Dash 1), me as Dash 2, a second-cruise JO as Dash 3, and another nugget as Dash 4. I was excited to be a part of the “A-team,” so to speak. I had participated in the strike-planning portion of our mission and was very familiar with the route, the tanking plan, and most of the tactical aspects. I also had put

I felt myself



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together the JDAM (joint direct attack munition) plan for our platform and a kneeboard card for the strikers.

Rehearsing every tactical detail over and over in my head made me feel like I knew the plan inside and out. I didn't want to be the weak link in the chain during the execution of this mission, especially on opening night.

The overall plan called for us to do something a little different than what we were accustomed to: We would get gas in a different region than usual. I had a few questions regarding the admin portion of our flight, especially because the procedures had changed. Not to worry though, I was the junior guy in the flight, and I always would have someone leading me around, right? And so the story goes.

The brief went without a hitch. I got to the flight deck early to get focused and to find some sort of comfort level. Start-ups went normally until a small snafu with the JDAM load appeared. This glitch got me spooled up; however, the problem was resolved, and I launched with a full mission-capable platform in sufficient time to proceed as planned.

We had briefed a running rendezvous en route to the first tanker. If we didn't join on the tanker, we planned to get our division together on the wing of the KC-10, then tank and go to the rendezvous point for the strike package. Fortunately for me, I joined the skipper about halfway to the tanker. The chore of finding the tanker and getting us established on port observation now was his. I had found my happy place, the position I knew best: the combat wingman. After a few moments, I was able to relax and take in the magnitude of the upcoming strike. The view to the south under the NVGs simply was awesome, and I watched as all the high fliers headed north. Tonight definitely was not a good night to be a target in Baghdad.

As we flew toward our tanker track, it became

apparent that tonight's tanking evolution would be a little sportier than what I had been accustomed to. I was shocked to see so many thirsty airplanes hanging on a single KC-10. On a crystal-clear night, this scene may not have been so daunting. However, in the occasional IMC and turbulence we were encountering, this situation only added to my adrenaline surge. I felt myself starting to squeeze the black out of the stick.

Progress across the KC-10's two wing air-refueling pods (WARP) was slow, and time began working against us. The suppression of enemy air defenses (SEAD) assets got their gas. A few other strikers in the package got a portion of their total fragged give, as well. Our division was low on gas and dangerously close to reaching bingo fuel before our first plug. We now had a full-blown fuel and time problem that brought with it an increasing amount of pressure to expeditiously get into the basket. The turbulence wasn't helping things, either.

An eternity seemed to pass before any of our division made it to the pods. Dash 1 and Dash 4 were the first to go, and they established themselves behind the starboard and port WARPs, respectively. Dash 3 and I continued to wait in port observation for our turn. I would get my chance on the port hose as soon as Dash 4 was done. Dash 3 would get his stab at the starboard basket as soon as Dash 1 was complete. For some unknown reason, my attention was focused on Dash 1, and I watched as he entered the starboard drogue. In what seemed to be a fit of rage, the WARP's hose lashed back at him with a sine wave that snapped off his probe.

Here's the situation: Dash 3 was at bingo fuel, I was about 300 pounds above bingo, our division lead was in starboard observation with limited fuel and major issues, and Dash 4 was in the basket on the port hose. What was I to do?

starting to squeeze the black out of the stick.

Dash 1's immediate need was for a vector to the nearest divert. The planning lead that was airborne with us immediately came up on the radio and suggested "King K." That suggestion drew a question mark in my shrinking brain. Cycling through the waypoints, I found one that was listed as King. No, I wasn't the one diverting, but I wasn't sure if I would have to go with Dash 1 to that airfield. Dash 3 said he was diverting. A decision had to be made. Shall I stay or shall I go? Dash 1 did not say anything about me going with him. Because we were trying to get as many bombs on target as possible, I assumed from his silence I was to get my gas and go with two other Rhinos waiting in line on the tanker. I decided to tank and proceed on the mission as planned.

With one hose down, the need for jets behind me to get into the basket became more critical. My initial plug needed to be quick, and I needed to grab enough gas so the strikers behind me could get in and avoid having to bingo. As the sands of time continued to slip away, getting all the remaining strikers across the hose and allowing me to top off in time to make the TOT was out of the question. My trip north tonight was off. The plan now was to join a section of FA-18Cs that also were victims of the traffic jam on the tanker and RTB as Dash 3. The Charlies and I still needed gas, so we spent the next 45 minutes joining on another tanker.

Already flustered by the breakdown of our plan, I was further removed from my comfort zone when the lead of the Charlie section suffered a hydraulic problem and needed to immediately leave the tanker. Maintaining section integrity, the two Charlies started their return to mom. I would have to top off and RTB by myself.

My lack of basic knowledge began to show. I knew the strike route and the strike plan well, but my admin knowledge was weak because I had expected to be led through that portion of the flight. I now was faced with answering a lot of questions by myself: What altitude was I supposed to be at? What altitude was I supposed to be at on the way home? Where could I descend? Getting close to bingo, what airfield was I going to divert to in the event I found myself in the same predicament my skipper had had?

I had to focus on the closest alligator to the canoe.

The priority was to get enough fuel to make it back to mom for the next recovery. The ensuing turbulence and lightshow caused by the static discharge jumping between my probe and the basket made the fueling task difficult. After some jousting, I got into the basket and topped off.

My thoughts drifted to my lack of participation in the war that night, but quickly refocused when I remembered the other alligator that had been swimming next to the canoe a minute ago. I still had to get myself out of country and back home to mom. The helmet fire I experienced as I rummaged through information probably was seen for miles. I eventually found the info I needed and made it back to the ship.

Although I was able to get home, there are quite a few lessons to be learned from my experience. The foremost is the basic breakdown in CRM. That my lead had to divert and that I was of no help to him bothered me. "King K" meant nothing to me until the instant lead's probe came off, and he was diverting there. I couldn't tell you anything about that place, other than its range and bearing from our position on the tanker. What if I had been the one who needed to divert? I wasn't fully prepared for the entire mission. I felt thoroughly prepared for the tactical portion of the flight, but I totally was relying on being led back and forth. I had not focused on the administrative portion of the flight.

Flying in and out of Iraq had become commonplace, and I relied too much on my experience from previous flights and the people I flew with. I did not know anything about our divers. I didn't even know if they were going to be open. Had I planned to lead the flight that night, I would have been much better prepared to handle the events. To execute advanced tactics, you first have to remember the basics. 

Lt. Walborn was a member of VFA-115 at the time of the story. He is currently an instructor pilot at VFA-122.

CRM and risk management apply to all threats: red and blue. Many "insurgent gremlins" attacked this mission during the easy part of the flight, and our intrepid strike fighter pilots were wanting for tactics and a plan. What are the hazards during all phases? How will you defeat them?—Capt. Ken Neubauer, aviation safety director, Naval Safety Center