

# Over the Fence and

by Lt. David Culpepper

About a week into the war in Kosovo, we launched on a day, double-cycle, Airborne Forward Air Control (FAC [A]) mission. We checked in with AWACS, and then flew to one of many active tanker tracks to top off before going in-country.

Coming off the tanker, my wingman experienced one of those little nagging problems. Nothing major, but enough to decide it was not wise to go into hostile territory. I kissed him off to make the next recovery. I decided I would at least proceed to the marshal point, check in with the E-2, and see if I could be any use. After all, I still had ordnance.

The E-2 controller told me that I was in luck. Our sister squadron had apparently experienced the same type of problem and their FAC (A) was also a single looking for a friend. I checked in with Tiger 21, and we coordinated an altitude to rendezvous.

I headed to the marshal point and began an orbit while trying to find Tiger 21. Now, in hindsight, I realize he never actually said to meet him at the marshal point. That was an assumption I made because, being over friendly territory, it was the only thing that made sense.

After several minutes, I 'fessed up on the radio that I couldn't find him. Tiger told me his location with a latitude and longitude. I didn't have to look at my chart to know that he was "over the fence," but I was still surprised when I plotted it and found he was orbiting an active SAM ring. I made a beeline to his reported position to join up.

In the interim, Tiger 21 had been trying to identify activity on the ground. Just before I

arrived, he found a hostile force and started dropping ordnance. By the time I got there, he had delivered both his bombs and neither had fused. Tiger then began to give us a talk-on to the target before we were joined up. We had made one lap around the target when my RHAW gear lit up like I had never seen.

I leveled my wings and looked toward the spike. I spotted a long plume rising out of the SAM area, coming in my direction. My heart jumped into my throat.

I swallowed hard and called my spike with the best bullseye call I could muster to get the F-16CJs pointed in the right direction.

I began to jink while my RIO expended countermeasures. The SAM's booster had now burned out, which made it tough to see. Shortly thereafter, we dropped our spike only to hear Tiger 21 had picked it up. It wasn't over, but I did breathe a sigh of relief. At least I didn't have to outrun the bear anymore. I maneuvered to a cover position for Tiger 21 while I tried to see the missile again. No joy.

Tiger was doing his best defense now and soon dropped his spike. Thanks Grumman, for EA-6Bs.

We hightailed it out of there. We were out of time anyway, but I just wanted to get back



# and Over the SAMs!

to the boat. We hit the tanker one more time and recovered without incident.

Every day we fly, we make choices. Often, those choices involve go-no-go decisions. We look at whatever problem we have and consider all the possibilities.

if we just get out of this one, we will never make such a stupid decision ever again.

Some requirements are not flexible, and for good reason. We would never take an airplane flying with one hydraulic system failed, with an engine out, or without a navigation platform at night or in IMC. And we all know the smallest combat-fighter element is the section. ✈️

Lt. Culpepper flies with VF-14.



Our “what-if” logic may go something like this: 1) The number 2 generator is not working. 2) I have two generators. 3) The entire flight will be flown in daylight. 4) The current weather is beautiful VMC and is forecast to remain the same. 5) If the number 1 generator fails, I still have the emergency generator. 6) If the emergency generator fails, I’ll be NORDDO, but the plane won’t fall out of the sky. I’ll just join my wingman and come home. Conclusion: I take the airplane flying.

You can see how this logic can push things farther than necessary. We may find ourselves airborne and realize that the risk we took was not worth the gain. Or worse, our backup plan may disappear, and the failure may follow a path we never anticipated. Now painted into a corner, we will swear on a stack of bibles that

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Photo by LCDr. Tom Prochilo