

Crew Resource Management

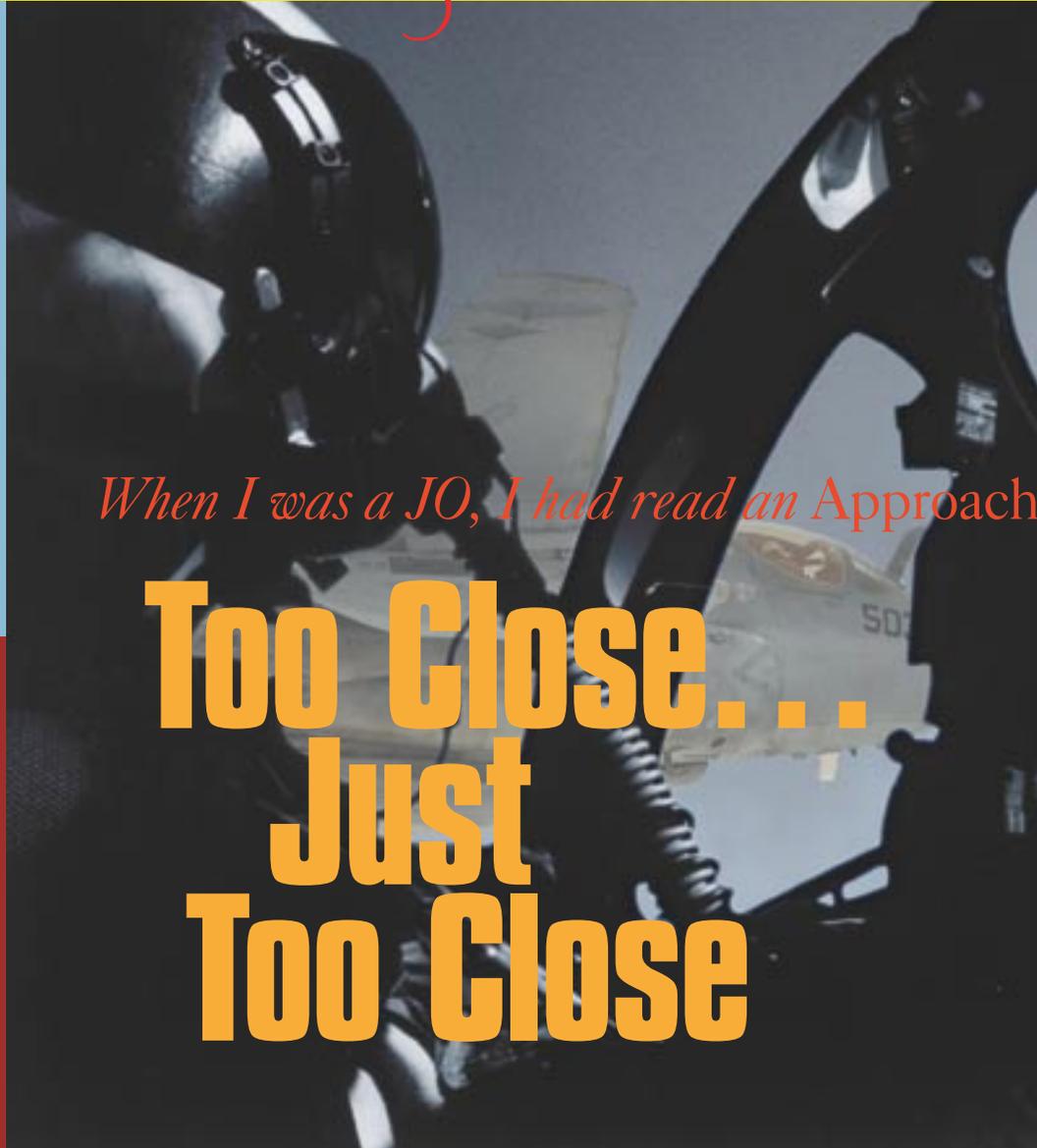
Situational Awareness
Assertiveness
Decision Making
Communication
Leadership
Adaptability/Flexibility
Mission Analysis



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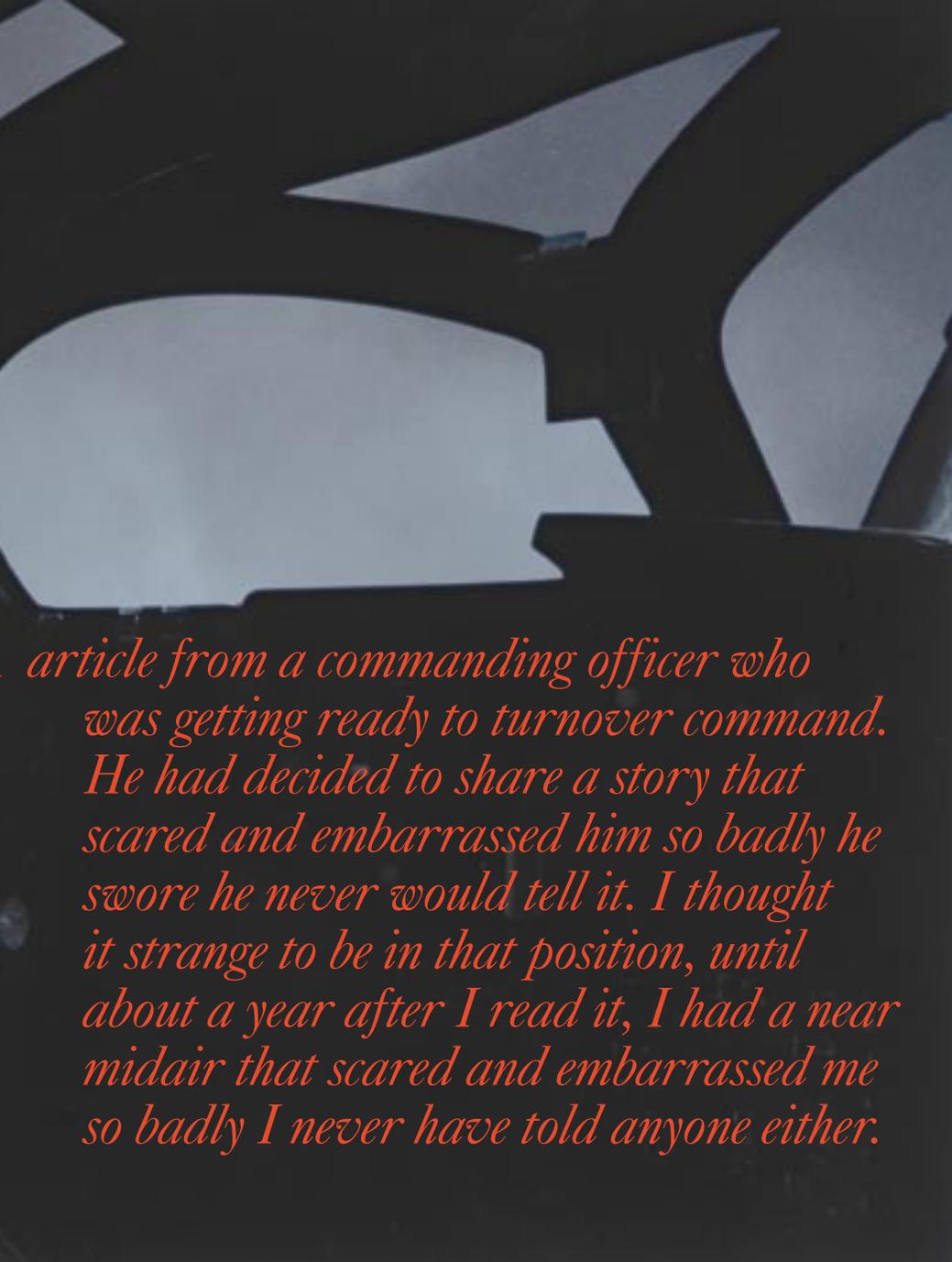
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By Cdr. C. E. Luttrell

It was a standard stormy winter in the Northwest, and we were about two thirds of the way through the field-carrier-landing-practice (FCLP) period for the next fleet-replacement-squadron (FRS) carrier qualification (CQ). After two weeks of bad weather and having to do carrier-controlled approaches (CCAs), paddles was feeling the pressure of the students not getting enough looks at the ball before heading south to the ship. The bad weather this day would be no different, and the winds from the south guaranteed we would have intermittent rain for the evening.

The day FCLP went fairly well because the ceiling was high enough to open the pattern, but the winds were gusty and at the edge of SOP limits for the students. After we completed the day



article from a commanding officer who was getting ready to turnover command. He had decided to share a story that scared and embarrassed him so badly he swore he never would tell it. I thought it strange to be in that position, until about a year after I read it, I had a near midair that scared and embarrassed me so badly I never have told anyone either.

bounce and evening approached, the rain and wind had moved in, and the night period was in jeopardy. The entire night-page cast decided we would grab a bite to eat and return to the ready room at 1630 for a final determination on weather. As it started to get dark, the clouds and rain rolled in with some good gusts and downpours. Paddles started the brief, and after reading the weather report, determined we would have to do CCAs, but said, "If the ceiling lifts, we would have each aircraft turn downwind into the tower pattern."

An hour and twenty minutes later, six jets took off from runway 7 (primary runway to be used for noise abate-

ment), and hopped into the CCA pattern. After two passes, paddles tried to convince tower the FCLP pattern should be open, with aircrew reporting a 1,700-foot ceiling. What he didn't tell them was the clouds were blowing through so fast that at times the ceiling would be down to 600 feet. Tower replied they could not see the aircraft from their view, and weather was calling 1,100-feet broken.

As the high winds shifted, tower switched the duty to runway 13 (primary-instrument runway), and said to transition to the FCLP pattern. They added that if runway 13 didn't work, they could put us back into the CCA box. Paddles closed up his shack, and raced to the approach end of runway 13. While he was gone, tower called for everyone to stay below 1,200 feet, and fly runway-7 pattern until the approach end, then turn to parallel 13 on the right side. At the upwind numbers of 13, expect a call to a left downwind, which would essentially turn us across the CCA path.

Visibility deteriorated in the heavy, but isolated rain showers. Tower tried to keep the interval organized but had mixed-up call signs, and even lost sight of one jet. Within a minute, tower had lost sight of two more jets, and was frantically trying to get everyone into some sort of organized flow. As the intensity of the rain increased, tower lost situational awareness

(SA), and could no longer call people's turns in the pattern. This is where we all got stupid.

Tower asked if we could maintain visual-meteorological conditions (VMC), and I looked over at my student pilot and asked him if he had anyone beside our interval in sight.

He laughed and asked, "Are you kidding me?"

I hesitated to answer tower knowing how bad paddles wanted those extra looks the visual-flight-rules (VFR) pattern would give us. Meanwhile, two other JO instructors piped up saying, "affirmative" and "yes we can."

I was not smart enough to follow their inputs with

the correct answer, “no.”

We continued with the gaggle and eventually got the six jets into the correct pattern, but the rain at the departure end of runway 13 really was getting heavy. As we climbed out of our first pass on the new duty runway, we were told our interval (2 of 6) was on the downwind at the departure end.

“Great,” I thought, “we have a starting point.” Maybe this plan will work out—as the hair rose on the back of my neck.

Just as we started our turn, I saw the antismash light on our real interval, who had been about a mile and a half past the departure end of the runway, but tower had lost them. They inadvertently had directed us to Dash 1 of the group instead of Dash 2; I told the pilot to take out his turn and he asked why. I explained to him that we had the wrong interval, and we needed to extend upwind to get proper separation. I called tower and told them Dash 2’s location, so they could gain some SA on the pattern. Had either the tower or I had any SA, we would have called for CCAs. I was so busy trying to find the other aircraft in the pattern, I didn’t even think to call a knock-it-off. We had to get those passes done.

The first guy (Dash 4) to touch down after us had been listening when we told tower our position. When tower asked if he had his interval, he replied, “Yes, I think so.”

Three strikes and we were out: No more chances to break the chain.

Dash 4 flew upwind, and I had him in sight the whole time. I started to feel comfortable at least the aircrew were gaining some SA about the pattern, and we would be OK. The Dash 5 jet had been busy trying to get his pilot to a good start on his pass, and had not been paying attention to what had been going on in the pattern. When his jet lifted off, tower said his interval is past the upwind numbers and asked, “Do you have him?”

After a few seconds, the response was, “Interval in sight.”

I immediately asked my pilot if he had the plane lifting off the deck. He replied, “No.” But he would keep

padlocked on his interval, so he wouldn’t lose him. As I watched the jet lift off, and to my amazement, he did not climb straight ahead, but started his turn. He had picked the jet in front of us, not the one behind as his interval.

The tower controller repeated her call, “572, do you have your interval in sight?”

“Yes,” came the immediate response, but it was clear there were two people working on the same interval: Dash 3.

Tower made another call, “Aircraft lifting, that is your interval in front of you.”

They continued to climb and turn belly up to us and about 100 feet below. I called to my pilot immediately to come right; he did not question and turned. At the same time, tower screamed “572 lifting, do you have your interval?”

Again the reply calmly came, “interval in sight.”

As we took our cut away from the pattern, I could read the name on the back of the helmet of the other jet’s right seat when the antismash light flashed. We were close enough to see his kneeboard attached to his knee. I estimate we came within 10 feet of each other’s wingtip without them even knowing it. After a 30-degree cut, we leveled our wings, and I had the pilot look over. What he saw made him shout a few explicatives followed by, “We almost died!” He then took interval, and we took the next pass to a full stop.

After landing, we called paddles, who said he did not see the event because he had a guy on the ball. The crew in Dash 5 never saw us because they dropped their scan “knowing” they had their interval in sight. The tower rep refused to say anything until she could talk to her department head. The tower supervisor concurred for his sake too. We had been within a couple of seconds of losing two airframes and possibly four aircrew to a midair.

I have read many times about dying to get the X. I put myself in that position without even disagreeing with my peers on the weather, or our ability to conduct VMC operations in the pouring rain. Since that day, I have learned to pay attention when the hair on the back of my neck rises. I speak up about the lack of comfort no matter who is in the flight. 🦅

Cdr. Luttrell is with VAQ-139.

*Mishap-Free
Milestones*

VR-55	30 years	127,000 hours
VAQ-136	19 years	30,940 hours