

# Mishap Flight Lead on a Low-Level

By LCdr. Steve Kiggans

**B**eing a flight lead is an immense responsibility, a lesson I relearned the hard way as a division lead on a low level one winter morning in Japan.

On the second half of an out-and-in, I briefed the route portion at Misawa Air Base. To my surprise, the charts we had did not contain the route restrictions pasted to them. Because I had briefed the same route less than two weeks earlier, I chose to brief the restrictions from memory.

I briefed the minimum altitude on the route to be 500-feet AGL, but other flight members thought it to be 200-feet AGL. After a short discussion, and regardless that we should have rechecked the route restrictions, I believed I had clarified the minimum altitude, as well as the need to stay above me as the lead.

Our Hornet squadron recently had flown plenty of low levels, so I assumed all flight members were proficient in the local procedures. My Dash 2 was a new pilot to the squadron but had plenty of experience, so I didn't question his ability in the low-level environment. Regardless of our one point of contention in the brief, I felt confident we safely would fly the route. After all, we thoroughly had briefed the low-level training rules and extensively had briefed each leg of the route. As the flight lead, I had set the minimum altitude at 500-feet AGL. I assumed that fact had been understood and would be followed by the other flight members—I assumed wrong.

Only a short distance after commencing the low level, while still at 700-feet AGL, my Dash 2, flying out of my view in a valley opposite me, hit a tree line with his right wing during a ridgeline crossing. He called an immediate "knock it off," so we climbed back to altitude, RTB'd, and did a controllability check en route.

Fortunately, the mishap aircraft recovered at NAF Atsugi, with only damage to the right leading and trailing-edge flaps, as well as an AIM-9X CATM seeker head full of wood. Considering most trees don't grow taller than 50 feet, he's fortunate to have walked away from the impact with simple damage to the wing and CATM.

My commanding officer ordered me to a human-factors board about two weeks after the mishap because of my poor performance as the flight lead. Two months later, following the release of the Class C safety-investigation report, my CAG directed an FNAEB (fleet naval aviation evaluation board) to be conducted on me. The board recommended an A-4 category for my poor flight leadership, demonstrated by not properly clarifying the minimum altitude and not recognizing the low proficiency of my wingman. The result of the FNAEB was assignment of probation status for six months; and loss of my flight-lead qualifications for three months. I did not fly for nearly five months throughout the FNAEB process.

The many review boards for the mishap pilot and myself, several nonpunitive letters of reprimand, and the probation period that resulted from this mishap, were difficult for my ego. They also led to more questions than answers in my head. One result, which came of this ordeal, was that the heavy responsibility of flight leadership was reinforced to me and all other aircrew surrounding the events of this mishap. As a flight leader, it was my responsibility to ensure the utmost in flight safety and to maintain proper flight discipline.

When I now fly low levels, I make sure every aspect is thoroughly briefed and understood by all flight members before executing low-level navigational training. As a flight lead, I make sure every member of my flight is ready to safely perform the mission. Although the flight lead assumes responsibility for overall conduct of the flight, it still is the responsibility of each flight member to make sure the rules are adhered to and the brief is followed. The results of not following the leadership of the flight lead can be fatal.

In this case, we were fortunate. Now I always take into consideration the personality, abilities, and skill level of the flight crews I fly with. I also make sure I understand all regulations pertaining to our flight and they are clearly stated to the aircrew I brief.

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