

When the Blue Threat Is Painted Gray

By LCdr. Stephen Higuera

Our hazrep summary line said, “Starboard outboard pylon-ejector feet of FA-18C grazed the top of the port wing of FA-18E during warfare-capabilities-exercise practice.” Although the incident only resulted in a hazrep, it certainly could have been much worse. With much talk about the blue threat, on another day, this midair could have resulted in the loss of two naval aviators and two FA-18s.

The flight was practice for the finale of a warfare-capabilities exercise during our aircraft carrier’s dependents-day cruise. The formation was briefed as two, line abreast, four-plane-diamond formations, with an E-2C in the slot between the two diamonds. The lead diamond formation was on the left and consisted of four FA-18Cs. The second diamond was on the right and consisted of two FA-18Es (lead and left wing) and two FA-18Fs (right wing and slot) aircraft. As the formation passed over the carrier, and in full view of everyone, the right wingman of the lead diamond formation and the left wingman of the right diamond formation grazed each other’s wings.

How could this have happened? The event was not some off-the-cuff, unbriefed formation—it had been thoroughly planned and briefed to air-wing leaders. In hindsight, however, it is clear all possible hazards

were not identified before this flight. Also, many naval aviators and naval flight officers had the opportunity to raise questions or ask for clarification and could have broken the chain of events.

Postflight inspection showed that the FA-18C’s starboard outboard pylon hit the top of the FA-18E’s port wing, about two feet inboard of the Rhino’s wingtip, with about 10 feet of wing overlap between the aircraft.

The obvious question no one asked was how would the right-diamond division leader make sure there was enough lateral separation from the left-lead division in this nonstandard formation? Would the pilot of the E-2C, between and aft of the diamond formation have any input on dressing the formation, and ensuring safe separation? What responsibility would the slot WSO (weapons-system officer) have? Were the inboard pilots of each division apprehensive? As you easily can see, plenty of concerns went unanswered.

Even though I wasn’t part of the flight, I am not without blame—I was the backup-right-division lead (in case the right-division leader’s wife delivered their child before the flight—another ORM issue altogether). I had sat in on a practice brief with the participating aircrew, my first exposure to the plan.

I still remember thinking I wouldn’t want to be

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one of those guys on the inside of the formation: flying formation off of their lead and not seeing the adjacent formation because of my formation-keeping responsibilities. However, I didn't question the plan or bring up my concerns to the overall flight lead. Why? Maybe because I knew this plan already had been briefed to senior leadership, and all factors had been taken into account. Maybe I also assumed this formation had been done before, so there was nothing else I could add to the plan. Whatever my reasons for not bringing up my concerns, I did not do my part to properly ORM this flight.

Everyone involved in this exercise, regardless of their rank or experience level, had a responsibility to ask for

clarification, as well as to ORM all aspects of this flight. Aviators with less experience might be reluctant to ask questions for fear of looking foolish, or for being given a hard time for not knowing something they should have. There should be many questions for any nonstandard evolution, especially if it involves a safety-of-flight issue. If a question needs to be asked then ask it.

Those of us with more experience must use that experience to ask the correct questions if something doesn't seem right or is unclear—our safety depends on it. Your efforts in performing proper ORM, specifically with identifying all possible hazards, could break the chain of events that would lead to a mishap. 🦅

LCdr. Higuera flies with VFA-143.