

CAN YOU BELIEVE IT?

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We felt a slight hot and humid breeze from the northwest. The heat index on the flight deck hovered around 105 degrees Fahrenheit, and it only would get hotter once the Air Boss called away engine starts. The carrier would have to create its own winds to get our 54,000-pound aircraft off the deck, but that wouldn't be a problem because we'd been doing the same thing for the last four months. We faced just another day in the North Arabian Gulf.

As far as our mission was concerned, everything had gone smoothly. Our pre-flight turned up no problems, and our system turn-on/evaluation was 4.0. We were "mike alpha" and ready to launch. We looked forward to a great flight and another four-tenths of a point toward the ubiquitous air medal all aviators covet.

To get a jump-start on our faster air-wing brethren, our mighty, lumbering Hawkeye normally launches first. This early launch also gets us out of their way as we climb to an altitude high enough to maximize our fuel efficiency and weapon-system effectiveness. Anyone who ever has seen or flown in an E-2C soon realizes visibility outside the cockpit is not one of its attributes.

To make up for the lack of windows, the powers

that be gave us an extremely reliable IFF system. The NFOs in the back use the IFF system to locate and identify contacts and to provide limited traffic deconfliction for the pilots. I can't recall the last time this system did not work.

For this mission, we had a seasoned crew in the back, two experienced pilots, a plane with a history of solid performance, and plenty of time. We were 20 minutes early. What could possibly go wrong?

Our problems began with the launch. After being delayed by four minutes, for reasons beyond our control, we took the cat and got launched—150 knots in two seconds. What a ride! The best roller-coaster ride doesn't even come close. After a proper Case I clear-



PHA Michael B.W. Watkins. Modified.



ing turn, we continued outbound and climbed. Passing through 2,000 feet, the “moles,” as the back-enders affectionately are called, turned their seats and began to check the weapon system. Within minutes, the combat-information-center (CIC) crew had the system up and running and reported “mike alpha,” which lets everyone on the carrier know we had full-up systems. We were going over the beach as scheduled, and our on-deck spare could shut down.

Launching late didn’t hamper the mission. We still had plenty of time to gather situational awareness (SA) and report on-station on-time. The schedule is built with some slop in it to allow for such contingencies. We never thought that launching a few minutes late would lead us down the road we were headed.

We continued our climb-out as we raced toward Kuwait. The air-control officer (ACO) started to build the crew’s SA of the air picture over Iraq, while the radar operator (RO) maintained the system. The combat-information-center officer (CICO) checked in with several control agencies and provided flight-following for the pilots. Because we were climbing out and not on profile, the radar wouldn’t be as effective for maintaining SA on aircraft around us. Until we got to altitude, we would have to rely mainly on our IFF system.

Because this was an afternoon flight, the sun was out of the west, and, with no clouds to provide protection from the glaring brightness, the pilots effectively were blinded. Remember that limited visibility I’d mentioned? It just got worse.

As we passed through 15,000 feet, a few tracks were generated behind us, indicating our fellow air-wing bubbas had launched and were making their way toward Kuwait. About this time, our IFF system decided to act up: The CICO saw we weren’t building any IFF tracks. As the RO troubleshot the system, the pilots no longer could expect accurate traffic calls, and, with the sun in their faces, the hair on the backs of their necks started to rise.

Within seconds, out of nowhere, an F-14 screamed overhead. With air-to-air radar, they probably had a “hit” on us and were able to avoid us, but they came close. Because they were climbing to altitude with the same blazing sun in their faces, they may or may not have had a tally on us until the last minute. Everything was OK: no harm, no foul. Our pilots were so unimpressed with what just had happened they chose not to tell the back-enders. Why bother us? They knew we were busy troubleshooting and checking in with the appropriate agencies. However, that close call was just the beginning. What happened next was enough to cause your heart to skip a beat.



Right behind the F-14 was an EA-6B, a plane blessed with no air-to-air radar. They were as blind as us. As the Prowler closed in on us, one has to wonder how these two aircraft could possibly try to violate the “big sky, little airplane” theory on a day that was CAVU (ceiling and visibility unlimited).

With everyone in the back consumed by the upcoming mission and troubleshooting our weapon system, we did not expect what happened next. All of a sudden, our plane violently shook from side-to-side, almost as if the pilots were wagging their wings to say hi to someone on the ground. Unfortunately, that was not the case, and, for the next 20 to 30 seconds, the pilots were fighting to keep the plane from falling out of the sky.

What had happened? The Prowler had crossed from right to left about 200 to 300 feet in front of us, and we flew through their jet wash. Scenes from “Top Gun” quickly came to mind. As the EA-6B departed as quickly as it had approached, the turbulence subsided, and we regained our composure and level flight.

After a brief discussion on how fortunate we were, we all took a deep breath and got back to the mission at hand. We still had to cover the AOR. The RO had successfully troubleshoot the IFF system and gotten it working.

Looking back, one has to wonder how in the world two aircraft could have tried to occupy the

same piece of real estate at the same time—especially with the weather we had. We had been flying this mission for four months and were pretty savvy. Could we in the back have done a better job painting the picture for the pilots? Sure we could have—we still had radar. We just got consumed with the mission that lay ahead and lost focus with what mattered most: our safety. As an E-2C aircrew, we are aware of our limited visibility, and we always brief that someone in the crew will provide flight-following to the front, but, for some reason, we failed to do so that day. In the future, I definitely will keep a closer eye on ownship.

We weren’t the only ones to learn from this incident. For those flying near or around an E-2C, you must realize that, unless you are ahead of our 3-9 line-of-sight, we probably are not going to see you. Also, when we are climbing out at 21 units AOA and around 120 to 130 knots, we are close to our stall speed. I can’t fathom the idea of getting out of my seat, shuffling to the door, and trying to bail out while the aircraft is falling out of the sky.

Don’t ever get so consumed by troubleshooting or the mission to forget to keep an eye around your aircraft. Only you can prevent a midair. 🛩️

The authors fly with VAW-121.