

A Bright, Clear Friggin' Day



By LCdr. Scott Miller

Lead and wing compare notes.

What Happened

Lead: The flight was a good deal, day launch, pinky recovery, Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) mission on the first day of the New Year. My section was scheduled for three tanking evolutions and two hour-long vulnerability windows over Iraq, bracketed by an hour of transit each way. I briefed admin, tactical admin, and mission specifics, making it clear I wanted to execute a professional tanker rendezvous. I spoke directly to the technique I would use, including how I wanted my wingman in a loose cruise formation for any daytime tanker rendezvous. I specifically briefed this point because of poor (sucked, wide) formations I had seen joining on big-wing tankers.

My “nugget plus” wingman and I were to join above the North Arabian Gulf en route Al Basrah, Iraq, and destinations farther north. We visually joined into left combat spread. As he collapsed the formation to parade position, I pointed our section in the direction of our next navigational point. I set my autopilot to cross-country-transit mode: altimeter hold, airspeed hold, and heading select. I watched as he joined from my left into parade and then a little closer, a little too close. We passed thumbs up, which indicated our jets were ready for combat. I then gave the take-combat-spread signal and transmitted over our auxiliary radio, “Don’t hit me.”

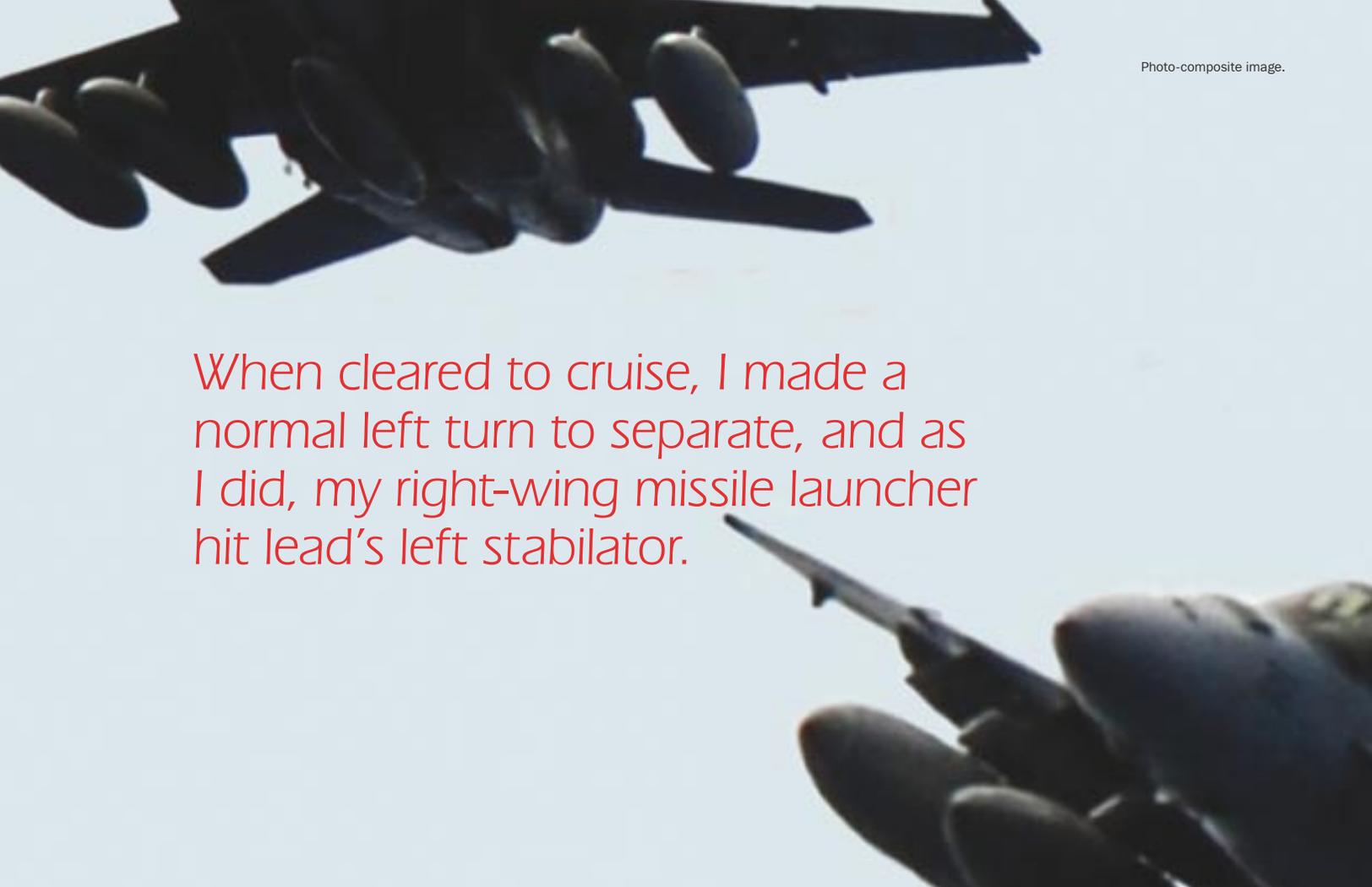
Simultaneous with my transmission, my wingman initiated a left roll away (right wing up) from me. As he did, his right-wingtip missile launcher (fortunately, no

missile was attached) nipped my left horizontal stabilator. As he rolled away, I looked back over my left shoulder at my stab and saw it move just slightly. I didn’t feel a thing, but I saw it happen.

Wing: On the initial rendezvous before I left the Gulf for another OIF mission, I joined to a position much closer than the standard parade position. This join-up was in part because of my misunderstanding of the brief when I was told “not to hang out in a loose tac-wing position.” This statement was directed at tanker rendezvous, but I applied it to the initial join-up. To make sure my flight lead knew I could effect a good rendezvous and fly a good parade position, I joined to a position much tighter than the NATOPS parade checkpoints. When cleared to cruise, I made a normal left turn to separate, and as I did, my right-wing missile launcher hit lead’s left stabilator. I did not feel anything at the time, and I couldn’t believe it when lead said he saw our planes bump.

What I Did

Lead: I don’t know how I knew his wing would be close enough to my stab to make contact. Maybe I had joined too close once and was debriefed the wingtip and stab were the closest point of approach between the airplanes. I did, however, see the two parts of our two airplanes touch. For some reason, I didn’t place



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the incident into the midair-collision category, and we did not begin the procedure that is briefed on every flight: Separate, get a visual inspection, determine controllability, slow flight in accordance with NATOPS, and land.

I could see the crush strip on the very outer tip of my stab had been bent upward. The FA-18A-D has a one-inch-wide metal strip, referred to as the “hockey stick,” wrapped around the trailing outer edge of the mostly composite stabilator. The metal strip is designed to accept a small impact and crumple, providing a buffer in the event of an incidental bump in environments such as a carrier hangar bay or a cramped airfield hangar. It does not provide a buffer at 24,000 feet and 300 knots.

I transmitted, “I think you just hit me.”

After a few moments, I passed my wingman the lead so I could inspect his wingtip. I couldn't tell for sure but thought I saw a light mark in the paint about midway down his wingtip missile launcher. We again changed lead, and after another visual inspection, he agreed the hockey stick on my left stab was slightly

bent up. I then decided that, based on our assigned combat mission and the assessed condition of our two aircraft, we should continue north for a five-and-a-half-hour-long mission.

Wing: After a quick visual inspection, I concluded that although I hadn't felt anything, our airplanes had hit. I thought about what I would say when we landed. I fully expected an immediate RTB and to be done flying. However, my lead sounded calm and collected, as we pressed northwest toward Iraq. I figured that our hit was not as bad as I initially had imagined. I felt about as low as a piece of whale feces at the bottom of the Gulf, and decided not to screw up anything else by questioning my experienced lead's decision-making. Even the thought I might fly again was enough for me to keep my mouth shut and fly combat spread.

What I Didn't Do

Wing: I did not join to the briefed parade checkpoints we learn in the FRS (fleet-replacement squadron). Also, once I was in a much-too-tight parade

position, I failed to recognize the two closest points on our airplanes were not my physical location to his wing but, rather, my right wing and his left stab.

Lead: I hope you are all waiting for me to beat myself about my head and shoulders, and I will. The words “midair collision” didn’t really hit me (pun intended) until I was back on deck and talking with my skipper in his stateroom.

First, this was a midair collision, and I should have treated it accordingly. I placed the importance of a routine OIF combat mission over NATOPS emergency procedures and flight safety. We did not separate; we actually rejoined and checked out each other. I only can guess the bump didn’t strike me (pun again) as a midair collision because neither of us had felt a thing. Both of us still were flying, there were no missing parts, and we weren’t going through NATOPS boldface procedures or determining minimum-landing airspeeds.

However, we did swap paint.

Second, the air-wing commander had made provisions for non-combat-ready aircraft to be replaced with armed-airborne spares. Our jets had experienced a midair collision and, by definition, were not combat-ready aircraft. I didn’t call in the airborne spares.

What I Should Have Done

Lead: This answer is obvious—I hope; it’s obvious to me now and was after the flight was over. I should have contacted the air-wing duty officer on the radio and sent the airborne-spare section in our place. We then should have talked with a squadron representative on the carrier and stepped through the procedures. We most likely would have had a straight-in day recovery during the next recovery-launch cycle, or maybe even an emergency pull-forward.

Wing: I should have joined to parade position and not flown past my ability level. I also should have recognized the two closest points between the flight. After admitting to myself we actually did bump, I should have made every effort to return to the boat, rather than complete our OIF mission. We have all briefed midair collisions before, and although I didn’t believe we had had one, I should have been assertive enough to make sure we took the most conservative path.

The Rest of the Story

Wing: The outcome was not what I initially had

expected, because I was allowed to fly again. However, the list of mistakes we made certainly had consequences. We spent a significant amount of time on duty and our ready-room stand-down the next day discussing what happened. Being the weak link and the reason your squadron can’t go over the beach was the lowest of my lows in aviation to date.

Lead: Another thing—probably the most important—is I didn’t realize until I was on deck that my wingman had been almost useless to me for the last five hours. I found out later that, during the flight, he was consumed with visions of a long green table and being at the wrong end. By the way, we ended up in the throes of what turned out to be a very busy combat mission. It included on-station relief of another section of squadron airplanes that had shot a Maverick and fired their guns against hostile forces. I needed my section to be on top of our game, and we were not.

Fortunately, our airplane’s control surfaces did not disintegrate during flight, we were not shot at, and we were not required to employ our weapons. We had no other flight incidents, returned safely to the ship, and after a brief visual inspection by our maintenance crew, both jets flew later that night.

This incident and all the postflight discussions were an inexpensive lesson on how dangerous naval aviation can be. We experienced a midair collision—ever so slight—but one nonetheless, and survived. Neither I, nor my wingman, made the right decision once the incident had happened. The Swiss cheese holes nearly lined up for a catastrophic event. Neither of us adequately questioned what had happened, or were willing or able to make the right decision at the right time.

Other sentences I wrote but can’t place seem to go with this article.

1. The most dangerous airplane out there is your wingman.
2. Professional rendezvous and strict adherence to tanker procedures are very important.
3. A big-wing tanker rendezvous remains the most likely place for a midair collision.
4. FRS parade position is tight enough for what fleet pilots need parade for: penetrating weather and the overhead break. Getting close is not going to impress anyone; you are only going to scare yourself and your lead.
5. Being on the bench during a combat deployment sucks. 

LCdr. Miller flies with VFA-87.