

We Almost Made or a SeaCat!

by Lt. Gabe Soltero

At least once in his career, a pilot has a scary experience—I mean sheer terror. Not one where the weather is bad and you're trying to make it home on fumes, but a true brush with death.

Of course, mine happened on a beautiful day, CAVU to the moon. My crew was doing some leftover VERTREP with a supply ship following a replenishment, which is a good way to break up the monotony of plane-guard duty. We had just dropped off our last load on the supply ship and were on our way back to the carrier, about a 4-mile transit.

"Hang on a sec," the Air Boss called, as we approached from the port quarter. "I'll have winds for you as soon as we get out of our turn." We loitered just off the port

quarter at about 800 yards, parallel to the ship at 150 feet and 80 knots, expecting a charlie at any moment.

Remember in flight school, when instructors prefaced each simulated emergency with, "You're flying along, fat, dumb, and happy when suddenly..."? Well, our situation was not that far off. As we flew close aboard, roughly abeam the island, we heard a loud "Whoosh." Thinking I had just lost a window or, worse, an engine, I looked at my gauges and started to check my rear-view mirror, but did not get that far.

At my 2 o'clock was a Tomcat, rolling wings level at my altitude following a high-speed fly-by of the carrier. All this happened in less than two seconds. That Tomcat had flown between us and the CVN, passing



Photo-composite by Patricia Eaton

e a TomHawk,

within 100 yards of my helicopter at mach who-knows-what, scaring the hell out of us. The crewmen felt the hot exhaust through the open cabin door as the jet screamed by, which gives you an idea of exactly how close that bird came to making my Seahawk the first helicopter with swept-back wings protruding from its fuselage.

It took a few hours to get some info on this fly-by, as the Tomcat had not responded to the tower's radio calls and had its transponder turned off. I walked up to Pri-Fly to talk to the Boss and got the lowdown.

Turns out this Tomcat had been allegedly cleared to make the fly-by on another carrier, which at the time was more than 100 miles away. How could a pilot and a RIO make it all the way to an operational squad-

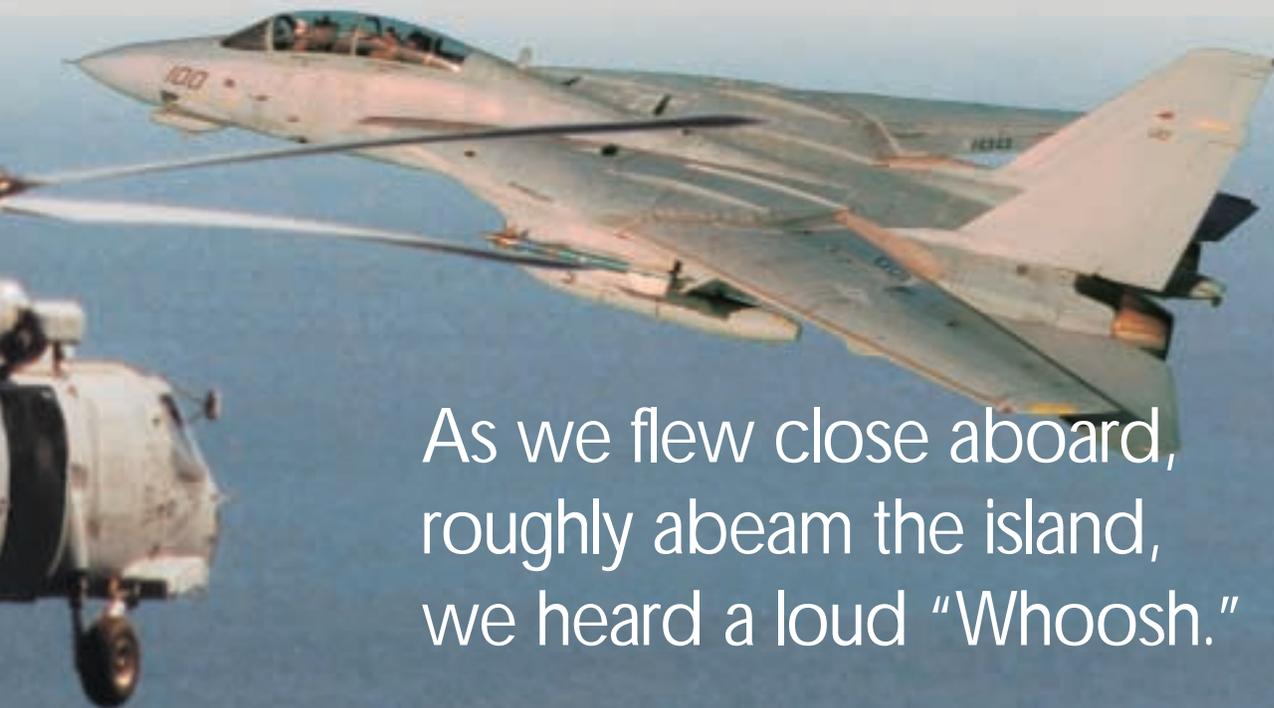
ron without knowing how to use a TACAN. To this day I do not know if these guys even realized they almost hit a helo.

Does this mean I think the Navy should stop fly-bys? Absolutely not. These maneuvers are a long-standing tradition in naval aviation and offer the flight-deck crews a chance to see the jets they launch at peak performance, usually bringing a smile to their faces. Plus, the fly-bys are fun to do.

However, as with any maneuver that combines high speed with low altitude, certain precautions are necessary. For instance, make sure there's no one in your way, and don't buzz the wrong ship. If a pilot follows these simple guidelines, no one gets hurt.



Lt. Soltero flies with HS-15.



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