

# I Can Do This in My Sleep

by Lt. Brian Nichols

I think I created one of the worst ways to fly formation. Well, maybe not created, but at least perfected. It was one morning at the end of our JTFX. We had been on a two-plane det, and fly-off time had rolled around. Once again, I found myself on a fly-off with little or no sleep, thanks to end-of-cruise paperwork late the night before. My squadron had a rule that the monthly readiness report and the end-of-cruise report had to be released from the ship before the fly-off. This typically involved about three hours of work, and unfortunately, we flew late the night before fly-off. Once the detachment's AZ completed the NALCOMIS download to give me the maintenance numbers required for the reports, it was nearly 0200. I finished the reports two and a half hours later, leaving about an hour and a half for sleep. Then I'd have to get back up to brief for the fly-off and route the messages through the chain of command to send them out.

I had promised myself repeatedly as a detachment operations officer that I wouldn't get into this situation. Normally I just would schedule someone else for the fly-off, because the night before fly-off is hectic. This time, however, I had said that I would do the fly-off, because the goal was to even out the fly-offs for each pilot, and we were at the end of our workup cycle. So after scrambling around trying to get my messages chopped and

taking care of chores, I found myself in the air waiting for the second flight to launch so we could begin the trip home.

The launch of the second aircraft was then delayed by the ship because of an UNREP period. By the time the second aircraft launched, I had to land to refuel before the flight home, as I had already been flying nearly three hours. After topping off with fuel, we joined up on the other aircraft and headed home.

An hour into the formation part of the trip, I began to have a hard time staying awake. My copilot and I were swapping controls every 15 to 20 minutes, so we could both benefit from the formation training and to give each other a break (he'd been up until 0300 helping me with the reports). I found that I had more luck keeping my eyes open if I was at the controls, because I could concentrate on holding good formation on the other aircraft. The flight from Cherry Point to Jacksonville was usually quick, but thanks to the delayed launch of the second aircraft, this time it meant about six hours of flying.

So there we were, flying wing. I was at the controls, trying hard to keep my eyes open. My copilot knew how tired I was and kept looking over to check on me. It was getting harder and harder to stay awake, and I was just about to swap controls with him when I started dreaming.



Photo-composite illustration by Allan Amen

I was standing in a crowd of people, talking, when a woman looked at me and said, “You shouldn’t be asleep right now, you’re flying.” I thought to myself how strange it was that she would say that to me—it didn’t fit into the dream at all. I quickly opened my eyes, and by some miracle, we were still in position on the other aircraft. I gave up the controls to my copilot and sat there feeling max stupid for the rest of the flight. I had neglected to

use ORM when I should have, and because of my lack of sleep, I jeopardized the lives of nine people.

Crew rest is in the books for a reason. All too often, however, it takes a backseat to doing things like messages and LSO duties. If my lack of rest had killed us all, nobody would have cared that my monthly readiness report and my end-of-cruise report had been on time. 🇺🇸

Lt. Nichols, now attached to NAS Brunswick, wrote this article while he was with HSL-44.