

# What Is He Doing?

By LCdr. Mike Fitzpatrick

**T**he air wing was in the Gulf of Alaska getting ready for Operation Northern Edge, scheduled to start in a few days. We had a nighttime, double-cycle, airborne-early-warning (AEW) and 2 v 2 air-intercept-control (AIC) hop.

Our E-2 had a full crew of five: a combat-experienced carrier-aircraft plane commander (CAPC) and copilot; a mission commander, combat-information-center officer (CICO); an air-control officer (ACO); and a nugget radar officer (RO).

As we climbed, the RO brought up the weapons systems, and the CICO checked in with the air-defense commander. Everything worked as advertised; the weapons systems were operating 4.0, the sky was clear, and moon illumination was 27 percent. The E-2 did what it was designed to do: provide AEW and command-and-control (C2). The only downside was

we had to wear anti-exposure “poopie” suits because the water temp hovered around a balmy 46 degrees Fahrenheit.

To prepare for the second half of the flight, our crew verified system setup and got ready for the first AIC run. We monitored the fighters as they checked in with strike and Redcrown. The fighters then checked in with us. We vectored them to their stations and gave them a standard AIC brief. Both AIC runs went without a hitch: The red fighters monitored the control frequency for reverse ground-control intercept (GCI), and the blue fighters practiced section tactics. Our nugget RO controller did a good job providing solid, Top-Gun-standard air control. After the second run, the fighters updated their fuel states, were given a steer to mom, and switched-up with strike. Shortly thereafter, things became non-routine.



After checking in with marshal, our crew noticed something wasn't quite right. One of the fighters we had been controlling, 204, was headed away from the marshal stack. The crew thought, "What the heck is he doing?"

Aircraft 204 quickly was joined by his wingman. Both marshal and the wingman were unable to reach 204's pilot on the radio. We dialed up the squadron's tactical frequency, and tried to contact 204—there was no response.

About this time, 204 began a slow descent, with his wingman following him down. The wingman reported no obvious movement inside 204's cockpit, nor did the pilot respond to radio calls. The situation was becoming dire, and the radio calls became more frantic as 204 continued to descend. Marshal, the wingman, and our crew continued to call the pilot on multiple frequencies, multiple times—with no joy.

Finally, as 204 passed through 8,000 feet, the pilot responded to radio calls. To everyone's relief, he leveled out at 6,500 feet and recovered.

During debrief, we learned that 204's onboard-oxygen-generating (OBOG) system had failed. The pilot was hypoxic. Only during his slow, unintentional descent did he regain consciousness as the ambient oxygen increased at the lower altitude.

If his OBOG system had failed while he was in the middle of a high-speed, AIC run, there may not have been sufficient time for him to recover the aircraft.

The next time I find myself thinking or I hear someone say, "What is he doing?" I'll consider the possibility the pilot may be hypoxic. Early recognition by a pilot or controller can help prevent disaster. 

LCdr. Fitzpatrick was flying with VAW-113 when he submitted this article.