

Shattered Sidewinder

by Lt. Kyle Miller

As a nugget RIO approaching the middle of a cruise, I was sitting in the ready room awaiting my next trip up the JO stairmaster to the tower for another pri-fly. I'd been left off the schedule that day to give everyone else a chance to catch up on flight hours. I was looking forward to a good run on the treadmill and a slider before the roll 'em that night. The skipper walked in and changed all that in a heartbeat. Since he had some business with CAG and couldn't fly (a rare occasion, to say the least), he needed me to take his afternoon hop. "No problem, skipper," I said. I looked at the schedule and then tried to pick my jaw up off the floor. He was letting me go on a combat mission into Kosovo with another nugget.

With the war in Kosovo slowly winding down, we were well-versed on the mission: FAC(A) escort. We'd both done it numerous times, so the brief was standard. The FAC(A)'s



Photo by Andy Dunaway
Photo modification by Allan Amen



things interesting, we ran into severe turbulence and a nice negative-2G spike that sent us into the canopy.

A few seconds later, we popped out into blue skies over Albania, with our lead a few miles to the west. “The skipper is going to kill us!” we proclaimed, almost in unison, as we realized everything was fine, and we were starting to get rid of the ice.

We joined up and let lead look us over to see if anything else had gotten destroyed. (We were glad the LANTIRN pod was stowed.) We checked out fine, hit the tanker, and headed back north to give the Serbs another look.

Not wanting to relive the last situation, we looked harder for clear air to transit. No luck to the east, no luck west, no luck anywhere. The other FAC(A) section was having ditto, so we decided to try over the top. Getting a running start (the F-14A’s Pratt & Whitneys need a little help,

target area. After several calls with no reply, we finally told Cyclops where we were. (We didn’t want to conflict with the strike packages, and we wanted to give our lead a heads up.) We found out Kosovo was socked in and the weather was getting worse (go figure!). Our lead was heading our way to transit back to mother for the good-deal night recovery.

Being a couple of nuggets from the same RAG class and having gone through a particularly colorful flight, we filled the transit back to mother with discussions of what had just happened. We were glad it was over. We finally started talking to marshal and got ready for the Case 3 recovery.

As we got our marshal instructions and started to break away from lead, we got our final surprise of the evening. My pilot lost his VDI (the pilot’s primary attitude reference and best friend at night). After several minutes of troubleshooting and cycling the circuit-breaker, we decided it was a lost cause and reported it to marshal, so our skipper would know his nuggets were about to make a varsity play for the boat.

We discussed our crew coordination, including what the pilot wanted to hear coming down the chute, so we could suitcase the approach as much as possible. We made the approach without incident to an OK 2-wire...not

too shabby.

Over a debrief slider, we came up with a few ideas as to why our potentially disastrous hop worked out OK. First, we decided that our emphasis on crew coordination and talking each other through the problems kept us from doing something stupid (the bonus of a two-seat cockpit). Second, by sticking to NATOPS and flying conservatively, we avoided becoming a bigger threat to ourselves than the Serbs were.

Surviving our first nugget-nugget flight, we opened the door for more opportunities in the future. The skipper even chuckled about the Sidewinder. 

Lt. Miller is a RIO with VF-14.

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sometimes), we stroked the burners and headed for the mask-on-osphere.

Passing 33,000 feet, we started to overtake lead, so we came out of burner momentarily. Lead started to pull away passing through 34,000, but in the thin air, putting the “A” into burner is risky. We maintained position until 36,000 feet but started to fall off because of the high AOA required in the thinner air. Lead was pulling away. We didn’t want to snuff both motors and risk trying to restart them in the frosty goo below, so we started leaning to the west into a clear spot in Albanian air space.

We called lead to let him know our situation and our orbiting position but got no response, since he was working the freq drill back into the