

# "It Just Blew,

By Lt. Geoffrey Bowman

**O**ur air wing had been flying missions for two weeks in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom. I was scheduled as flight lead for a section of Hornets tasked with defensive-counter air (DCA). Lately, these missions had consisted of flying circles over northern Iraq for two hours, then waiting for tasking that only would come if a new SAM site was located.

Dash 2 went down on the catapult, and the spare was launched. The spare was from our Marine-Hornet squadron and was loaded with a standard close-air-support loadout of two GBU-12 (LGBs), and one joint-direct-attack munition (JDAM). This loadout was good news because we now could check in with a ground-forward-air controller and possibly drop our bombs. We discussed our game plan during the transit over

Turkey, but, first, we needed to refuel before heading into Iraq.

The weather worsened as we approached our fragged tanker track, but, fortunately, our KC-135 had found a piece of open air, and our first tanking was uneventful.

After check in with our ground-forward-air controller (GFAC), they told us they were under heavy fire from a mortar emplacement north of their position. They needed us to expend our ordnance near their position. The weather was less than ideal, so we planned on dropping my wingman's LGBs and letting the GFAC lase the target. This tactic was successful, and we then put a JDAM on an enemy bunker. The JDAM destroyed the bunker, and the GFAC reported, in his New Zealand accent, that troops were running from the location. He requested we



The smell of gunpowder filled the cockpit, and I worried the remaining rounds might cook off.

# I Swear"

use our 20 mm ammunition. We welcomed the request for 20 mm, set up in a strafe pattern, and began our runs.

On my first strafe run, I expended 290 rounds, and the FAC reported good results. After roll in on my second run, I squeezed the trigger and saw a large yellow flash with smoke, heard a boom, and breathed an overwhelming smell of gunpowder. Several thoughts went through my mind all at once. "What the #@\*&?" then, "I'm still in a dive, and I'm pointing right at the bad guys," and finally, "Pull up, idiot, you're still flying."

I managed to get out a pathetic, "Uh, off safe" call. I told my wingman my gun had exploded, and I planned to turn north. After my wingman finished his last run, he joined up, and we headed off target. The smell of gunpowder filled the cockpit, and I worried the remaining rounds might cook off. Soon, I figured if a cook-off were possible, it already would have happened.

As we pressed north to the tanker, I started to assess the damage. The first thing I noticed was my radar, surprisingly, had not frozen. I then realized some of the panels around the gun were blown open. It was hard to see the extent of the damage because the windscreen was dirty after firing the gun.

My wingman inspected my aircraft's nose. He said it looked "pretty bad," but added, "the refueling-probe door does not appear damaged." I had to decide if I could aerial refuel or should divert. I extended my refueling probe and watched as the door hitched a little, but the probe made it out and appeared normal. I



decided to leave the probe out, and we headed to the tanker.

I was low on gas when we arrived on the tanker's wing. As a result, I had to kick a section of Hornets out of the basket to get some tide-me-over gas. I decided my situation was OK, and I would take it back to the boat.

About halfway back, my problems worsened when my heads-up display disappeared. I checked the BIT page, and the HUD still showed "Go." I tried one BIT with no success and expected to get the night no-HUD pass. The flying qualities remained good, and the engine indications were normal. My wingman offered to bring me in on his wing and to drop me off on the ball, but I had done this maneuver once before on cruise and had developed vertigo, so I declined his offer. Upon check in with approach, I told the LSOs I had damage to my nose and was no-HUD, but I didn't expect it to affect the flying qualities.

While I lowered the gear, the jet felt slow as it reached on-speed. My airspeed showed I was 10 knots slow for my AOA cross-check. I

remembered my wingman had called out some airspeeds on the transit back, and ours had matched. I believed the airspeed and sped up to the proper speed for my aircraft gross weight. I told the LSOs I would be flying airspeed, not AOA, for the approach. Paddles gave me some love, and I recovered shipboard. Paddles said I showed a red (fast) approach light but appeared on-speed.

I inspected the damage and realized how fortunate I was. The gun diffuser had been blown apart in two places. The nose cone had a hole through the bottom and top where two rounds had passed through the blown barrel after the explosion. The composite on the nose cone had unraveled from the front and aft portions. Postflight inspection showed the composite had FODed the port engine, although engine indications remained normal. In two similar incidents, both pilots had to eject because of aircraft damage.

In retrospect, there were a few lessons learned from this incident. I should have tried fuel-probe extension closer to the tanker; extending my probe that far from the tanker cost me precious gas. I needed to make a decision about diverting.

I shouldn't have accepted the damage description of "pretty bad" from my wingman. We assumed we saw all the damage to the aircraft. Postflight inspection showed the damage was far worse than what we had seen in-flight. I never thought my engines could have been FODed, but they were.

Finally, I should have accepted my wingman's offer to drop me off on the ball. This plan would have given me a better airspeed comparison, and it would have been good crew-resource management. I assumed, because the aircraft was flying normally with gear up, it would fly normally in the landing configuration. 🏆

Lt. Bowman flies with VFA-37.

**In two similar incidents,  
both pilots had to eject.**

*VFA-37 was extremely fortunate in this incident. In the previous four years, similar incidents had forced two other aviators to eject from their FA-18 when a gun malfunction occurred. Lt. Bowman flew over 500 miles back to the USS Harry S. Truman (CVN 75). After a five-hour mission, without his primary attitude reference and with AOA problems, he landed this aircraft shipboard.—LCdr. Will Powers, VFA-37 safety officer.*

