



**T**he air wing had been conducting sustained combat operations over Serbia in support of Operation Allied Force for five weeks. The briefings and debriefings had become routine, and this day was no exception. My junior wingman and I were excited about the prospect of two JOs raging into bad-guy land on a close air support (CAS) mission, dropping bombs and launching missiles, and then returning to Mom for the Sierra-Hotel break. It was the kind of hop that makes an aviator wonder why he gets paid for flying jets.

The brief, man-up and launch were uneventful. Magnum Joe and I joined up during the transit to the tanker track. After we topped off from Iron Maiden, we proceeded to our holding

point on the border between Albania, Kosovo and Montenegro.

The adrenaline began pumping as we checked in and listened to the chatter on the FAC(A) [forward air controller (airborne)] frequency.

“Tanks in the open, tanks in the open, Holmes One Two proceed to the target area!” That was our cue.

We pushed from the control point at 30,000 feet and 520 knots. We double-checked that everything in our cockpits was configured for combat.

As we crossed the border and began our descent to the ingress altitude, we began to randomly jink our aircraft while scanning the ground for AAA and surface-to-air missiles. Approximately 25 miles into Kosovo, I heard a



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loud popping noise and felt a moderate thump. I scanned the engine instruments and hydraulic gauges and was relieved to find normal indications. My wingman was still in his briefed position, so it was obvious we hadn't bumped each other.

As I continued to ponder the probable causes of what I had heard and felt, I noticed a 5-inch crack in the forward left corner of the canopy. "Did I miss that on the preflight?" I wondered. I then noticed that the triangular piece of glass now formed by the crack and the canopy rails was pushed inward slightly and that the crack had migrated through the entire thickness of the canopy glass.

Canceling the mission was one of the toughest calls I've ever made, but I notified the FAC(A) and expeditiously exited Kosovo.

Once safely across the border, we slowed down and began a gradual descent for the transit back to the ship. My wingman and I briefed the contingencies in the event I lost my canopy. There were two divers, and we decided that Dash 2 would take the nav and comm lead since I would not be able to hear anything. I lowered my seat, tightened my mask and visor, secured loose gear in the cockpit, and crossed my fingers.

Luckily, I didn't have to flight-test the convertible version of the Hornet that day. The remainder of the flight, including the straight-in approach, was uneventful. The engineering investigation into the cause of the crack is still in progress. 🦅

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