

On a very dark night, the air wing launched another sizable strike-familiarization package in support of Operation Southern Watch (OSW).

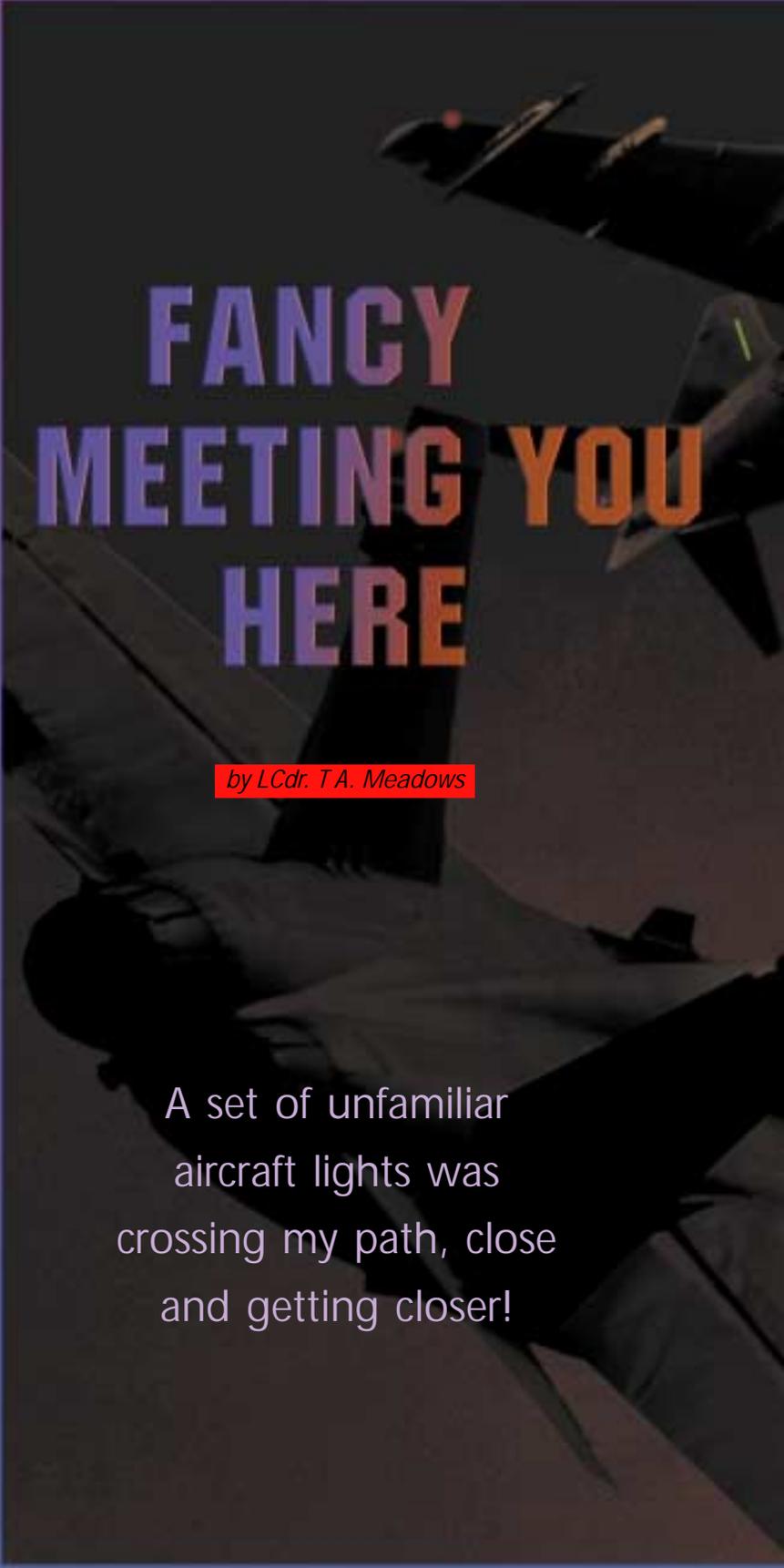
However, the composition of this package was unique. Not only did we have a dozen or so of the standard air-wing aircraft, but we also had the pleasure of being the second package of our deployment to include some of our allied friends in the theater: British pilots flying Harriers.

The brief was the standard OSW strike fam with a little multi-national twist thrown in. Nothing this salty air wing couldn't handle. There had been some communications problems between our ship and our newly arrived allies, but we felt the recent meetings between the pilots from both ships had worked out the tactical procedures related to the mission. Armed with this information, the players launched for our respective tankers.

Night tanking over Kuwait with 20 aircraft on two tankers is enough to raise the blood pressure of any pilot, and this time was no exception. During a careful rendezvous, we had ample opportunity to swap paint with a number of our air-wing brethren, and once joined, the excitement continued. Flying as Dash 6 on the port wing of the USAF tanker on a no-horizon night kept me on edge. As the long echelon played crack-the-whip into and out of every turn, each pilot was working hard to maintain a good position.

My wingman and I finally got our fuel and were able to depart the tanker to the relative safety of our rendezvous stack. Once joined, the entire package pushed in-country under NVG lighting, and I felt the worst was over. Everyone in the package seemed to be in place as I watched the air-to-air tacan steady to the briefed range. The other players were positioned a couple miles in front. The tactical procedures went as planned, although some low-altitude clouds obscured the target area. This kept us from doing the final part of the mock attack. Everyone was disappointed.

I made the final turn away from the target to an egress heading. Shortly after rolling out on course, I saw something unusual out of the corner of my eye. A set of unfamiliar aircraft lights was crossing my path, close and getting closer! I



FANCY MEETING YOU HERE

by LCdr. T A. Meadows

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Photo-composite by Allan Amen

shoved the nose of my aircraft down and watched as the unknown aircraft crossed overhead, passing within 200 feet of my FA-18. From his heading, I knew there was no chance he was a part of my mixed Hornet-Harrier division. My wingman was in position a mile out to my left, and my Harriers were in trail a couple of miles back (judging from the tacan range). The other aircraft in the package should have been at least 20 miles away. It had to be one of the SEAD support aircraft far out of position.

During the debrief, everyone claimed to have been at the prescribed altitudes and positions. No one could explain who or even what I had almost collided with shortly after coming off target.

The mystery was solved two days later when, by chance, I met up with an old friend of mine from the British carrier. We were discussing the good old days during his exchange tour with our Hornet FRS (where we both had been instructor pilots years earlier) when, ironically, the topic of the near-midair came up. The communication problem mentioned earlier almost cost the allied forces two aircraft and two pilots, my old friend and me. He never had received a full strike plan from our strike lead. His Harrier section, flying the fighter role, was capping overhead my target, on my altitude, instead of the correct position well to the northwest. The British gent was equally convinced one of our strike elements had been in the wrong place at the wrong time.

As we continue to operate with other services, either foreign or domestic, we have to get the plans passed by whatever means available. This may be easier said than done. Communication was consistently the largest problem in the Gulf. The ATO is a great tool for working the bugs out of the big picture but does nothing to de-conflict you from your own package. As a last resort, discuss any unresolved matters on the strike frequency; make sure all players are singing from the same sheet of music. Also, if the brief contains hints that something was not well-coordinated, you can bet that it wasn't.

I enjoyed running into my old friend while we were safely onboard the carrier. The airborne meeting was too sudden and much too close. 🇺🇸

LCdr. Meadows flies with VFA-86