

A composite image of a cockpit with a fire background. The title '200 Feet From Disaster' is overlaid in large, glowing orange and yellow text. The background shows a cockpit with various instruments and controls, and a fire or explosion in the upper right corner.

200 Feet From Disaster

by Lt. Lawrence Reay

I was fresh out of the RAG and had been in my squadron less than two months. The op tempo had been slow, but things were spooling up for our spring cruise. Being a new COTAC with 60 hours in type made me eager to join the fold of our squadron.

I was the only nugget in a two-plane crew of experienced aviators. My left-seater was a mission commander and a senior officer in the command. We briefed a night-section hop that would include some SSC at the tail end. Great! At the RAG, everything was canned and predictable, so I thought it would be nice to throw a real-world twist into the mix.

The weather wasn't perfect, but I quickly was learning that what had been a showstopper in the RAG was daily business in the fleet. We suited up and proceeded to the op area. We started with some standard, night-section maneuvers that were no big deal. Then our sense of comfort nearly killed us.

Photo-composite by Allan Amen

“Let’s work down lower to get under this layer,” lead called over the radio. We previously had contacted one of our ships in the area and planned to fly an attack profile on them. Lead looked for a hole to see if we could descend under the layer and proceed VMC at 1,500 feet. We took a loose cruise position as the maneuvering became more dynamic, and we pushed through what appeared to be a thin layer.

Descending through 2,500 feet, my level of comfort began dropping. I attributed my fear to my lack of experience. I

trusted the pilot and vigilantly hawked my instruments. As we passed 2,000 feet, we were in a turn away for separation. My left-seater was focused on the lead and radioed, “I think you should level out. You look low.”

They responded, “We’re level at fifteen hundred.”

Things got surreal as I digested what my instruments were saying. We were descending through 1,300 feet, in a 45-degree angle of bank, and we had a meaty 2,500-fpm rate of descent on the jet. I feigned a cool response to an increasingly deadly situation and calmly told the pilot to pull up. As we passed through 1,000 feet, my concern turned into fear. “Pull up,” I said again, but still not with the urgency one would expect from someone in a plane that would crash in about 10 seconds.

There was still no response from the pilot; he was completely focused outside, trying to understand the geometry of the situation. Finally, as we were passing through 500 feet, I yelled, “Pull up!” and reached for the ejection handle. I couldn’t believe what was happening and how quickly the situation had turned sour. I was about to pull the handle when I felt a reassuring snap on the jet and

positive G’s, indicating the pilot had initiated recovery. Just before getting a positive rate of climb, I saw 200 feet on the RADALT. We climbed to 10,000 feet. The silence in the cockpit was overwhelming.

It turned out the pilot had vertigo during the descent and thought he was straight and level while he was sliding back into a trail position. The dark-

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ness and lack of horizon led him to perceive that the lead was the one descending, not us. He was so focused on keeping sight of the lead that he had stopped cross-checking his instruments.

I learned more that night about flying than in all of flight school. First, the notion that anything in aviation is a canned event is nonsense. Expectations can lead to disappointment, and in the air, they can be deadly. The chain of events that evening could have been avoided with an increased awareness of risk and the dynamic nature of flight. Furthermore, the combination of crew members in the cockpit introduced a level of risk that was not addressed until after the incident. As we’ve heard a hundred times, seniority coupled with inexperience can lead to a lack of assertiveness from the less experienced person. Nuggets die just as easily as mission commanders. As part of the aircrew, everyone is responsible for speaking up when things don’t look right. Nobody should ever assume that the other guy is in control.

I was thankful I didn’t end up in the water that night. Flight training doesn’t stop after the RAG. 

Lt. Reay flies with VS-21.