



Here's the Other One Percent

by Lt. Matthew Cruse

Another beautiful day in Guam, just like every other day here. We were in the middle of the best training I'd ever had: an air-wing SFARP with dedicated bandit support, live ordnance, and best of all, three weeks on a tropical Pacific island. We were anxious to take advantage of these one-of-a-kind resources in our limited amount of time. We had been in Guam about a week, just long enough for everyone to become a little too comfortable with the new surroundings.

The live ordnance area was the island of Farallon di Medina, a half-mile-long chunk of rock jutting out of the ocean. Every day, an air-wing flight schedule was written to sort out the various working areas, but Farallon was scheduled with overlaps in order to accommodate the number of aircraft that needed to drop live ordnance. To help deconflict,

Original Tomcat photo by Ltjg. Stephen P. Davis
Photo-composite by Patricia Eaton

each area was given a shot-common frequency. Any aircrew entering the area was required to broadcast their intentions and then had to monitor the frequency to make sure they didn't interfere with other aircraft.

One morning, our division of Tomcats was briefing a 4 v X, self-escort strike, with each aircraft carrying two Mk-83 general-purpose bombs. We had two Hornets and a Lear jet with radar-jamming capabilities; along with our dedicated bandits, we were being controlled by an E-2C. After our individual crew briefs, we headed to the PR shop, suited up and ran to our jets.

Everything went as planned: four Tomcats airborne on time, en route the working area with live ordnance. We checked in with the E-2C on the area-common frequency, and then, followed by our bandits, we proceeded to the target area. It was their responsibility to act as range safety and to clear the target for our live-ordnance drops. The bandits completed their range-clearing run and were ready to play. Several minutes later, we reached our push point 50 miles from the target and started our strike.

Before we hit our first route point, the E-2C began calling a factor group on our nose for 25 miles. It was the Lear jet, jamming us right at the start of our route. The AWG-9 quickly burned through, and we prosecuted the group without much problem. The E-2C continued to paint a good picture, a single group capping over the target area, which turned into a two-group presentation in range, with the near group hot. Once again, we took care of the factor group and proceeded to the IP.

As we hit the IP, the E-2C was still calling a group capping in the target area. As the RIO in Dash 3, I began to think that the bandits were trying to test our target-area commit criteria; in other words, seeing if we were dumb enough to proceed with the bombing run with a hostile group at the target area. However, the bandits transmitted that there were no other bandits in the target area, and we were not painting any contacts over the target with our own radars. We assumed the E-2 had painted a "phantom" group, and after the

bandits called clear of the target, the E-2C gave no further calls.

We switched our weapons systems from air-to-air to air-to-ground mode and proceeded to our target with our live Mk-83s. Our game plan was to deliver our ordnance from a 20,000-foot roll-in, with about five seconds separating each aircraft in the division. As we hit the roll-in point, the lead Tomcat began his run, followed by Dash 2, then my aircraft. I saw both Tomcats in the dive in front of us and then saw lead begin his pull-up, so I knew he had dropped his bombs. At that instant, something caught my eye: two Hornets just above the deck, 12,000 feet below us, making a run over the target area. I couldn't believe my eyes. What were those guys doing there?

I quickly keyed the mike and yelled, "Abort!" several times over the area-common frequency. Unfortunately, Dash 2 also had pickled before the abort call. I saw the explosions from the lead Tomcat's bombs just in front of the first Hornet, and, seconds later, Dash 2's bombs exploded just aft of the second Hornet. I could tell the Hornets were very low, and I thought for sure they had been fraggged. As all four Tomcats pulled off target

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to rejoin, I saw that both Hornets were still flying—a huge relief.

After a few seconds, one of the Hornets came up over the common frequency and reiterated the fact that someone had just dropped live ordnance on them. I recognized the voice and knew immediately that it was the skipper of a Hornet squadron in my air wing. "Great," I thought, "we almost killed a skipper!" Later, we learned that the explosions were so close that the concussion shook their aircraft, but they were not fraggged.

We decided that we'd had enough excitement for one morning and headed back to base. On the way home, I must have gone over the situation a thousand times in my head. "How did they get into the target area without us hearing them?" I wondered. We were all going through the same



thing in our heads, wondering how it had happened, and feeling overjoyed that no one was hurt.

Once on deck, the Tomcat division got together to try to figure out exactly what had happened. Somehow, we, the strikers and the bandits, had convinced ourselves that the E-2C was painting a “phantom” group in the target area. At the PR shop, we ran into the E-2C controller, who told us he knew positively that aircraft were in the target area because he was picking up their squawk. But he never said so over shot common, believing the contact was a bandit testing our target-area tactics.

A few minutes later, we were called into a meeting with the Hornet skipper whom we had almost killed 45 minutes earlier. Although I was nervous at first seeing him face to face, the discussion was very professional. It was clear everyone wanted to get to the root of the problem. We learned that shortly after the exercise started, the unlucky section of Hornets entered the area to recce the target and work section low-altitude tactics. They didn’t know the target had been scheduled for another event. The Hornets were up on the area-common frequency for the target and actually heard all of our comms, but they thought we were in another working area. As far as they were concerned, the area was all theirs, and they switched to their tactical frequency in order to get rid of all the chatter on the area-common frequency.

The E-2C controller said he had watched this section come into the area and fly around the target area but thought they were part of the Bandit presentation. The Strikers never saw or heard these interlopers, and this fact led them to

believe the E-2C was painting a “phantom” group. Each player in this scenario held part of the blame. The section of Hornets should have checked in on the shot-common frequency and should have been suspicious when they heard all the comms on the common frequency. The strikers should have known something was wrong on the ingress, since we encountered a Lear jet in the first group, then two bandits in the second group. We knew from the brief that there were only three bandit aircraft. Finally, the E-2C should have been more assertive, especially since they were painting squawks on the two Hornets.

Several good learning points came out of this incident. First, a live bombing range should be scheduled as exclusive use only, not overlapped with several sections of aircraft that are not working or briefing together. Next, our CAG mandated that all aircraft operating in an assigned working area would be up a common frequency, not just to check in, but also to monitor. Also, the aircrew in any aircraft dropping live ordnance was required to make a call on guard prior to commencing the run. After recounting the events of what happened, it turned out that several people in the flight (including me) had had uneasy feelings prior to bombs coming off the airplanes. Any one of us could have knocked it off, figured out what was going on, then started over. On the other hand, how many times have aviators, especially in strike fighters, had uneasy feelings going into six-plane merge, or trying to identify a ground target? I’ve had this feeling countless times, and 99 percent of the time, everything worked out OK. Well, here was that other one percent.

Our focus on getting the “X,” especially with the limited resources and time allotted to us, forced us to push the limit. I certainly have increased my level of awareness for those “something just doesn’t feel right” moments, especially in multi-plane scenarios. I also have increased my commitment to reduce that risk when able. Much of the risk we face is out of our hands. However, when something arises that we do have some control over, we have to step up and make that dreaded “knock it off” call before we pass the point of no return. 🦅

Lt. Cruse was a first tour RIO at VF-154 when he wrote this article. He now flies with VFA-122.