

# The Night the New Guy Almost Died

by Lt. Paul Lanzilotta

It was a typical night hop during the first month of cruise: a double-cycle, surface search and coordination (SSC), and air-intercept control (AIC) mission. Although our E-2C crew was all junior officers, three members did have cruise-experience. During the briefing, when it came to the hot-pump and crew-switch bullet, our junior 3P covered it with the routine, “We don’t plan to do this tonight.” We completed an otherwise solid NATOPS brief before heading to the airplane. Right on time, we left the ready room and walked to our mighty Hummer, pumped up and ready to kick some butt.

The mission progressed smoothly. Our newest crew member controlled fighters on one event, then sea searchers on another, without much difficulty. Since he arrived at the squadron just before the cruise and this was our first flight together, I did not know much about him. He seemed very knowledgeable, which was typical of a recent FRS graduate. He acted appropriately intimidated by the whole “fleet naval aviation” thing, but he performed competently. I knew he would fit in at the squadron and become a mission commander in a couple of years.

The highlight of the mission occurred during the recovery phase. Before checking into marshal, we found out we were a hot-pump and crew-switch. I thought, “Well, I guess we should have briefed it, but it’s too late now.” The procedure is

not outlined in NATOPS but is described in our squadron SOP. During the hot-pump, you shut down the starboard engine, pump fuel through an access in the engine nacelle, then re-start the engine. During a crew-switch, the crew members, excluding the mission commander (CICO) and plane commander (CAPC), exit the aircraft, walk slightly aft, then straight out the wing line to the awaiting oncoming crew. The new CICO and CAPC then enter the aircraft for a passdown. The old CICO and CAPC exit, and finally, the three junior members of the new crew enter the airplane. The evolution involves four sets of crew members entering and exiting the aircraft. Do this on the flight deck of an aircraft carrier at night, with wings folded, parked right next to the foul line of the landing area, and you have a dangerous situation. Doing this procedure at sea is very different from during the day at the FRS.

After landing with an OK 3-wire (thanks, Paddles), we folded our wings and taxied to a spot in the crotch, right next to the foul line. The ship rocked us a lullaby as we were chained to the deck. Our pilots completed the secure checks. We discussed the crew-switch. I remember telling our new guy to be very careful getting around the chains that are usually in the exit path, near the engine and wing fold.

A few minutes after my crewmates shuffled past me toward the exit, our XO stepped into the

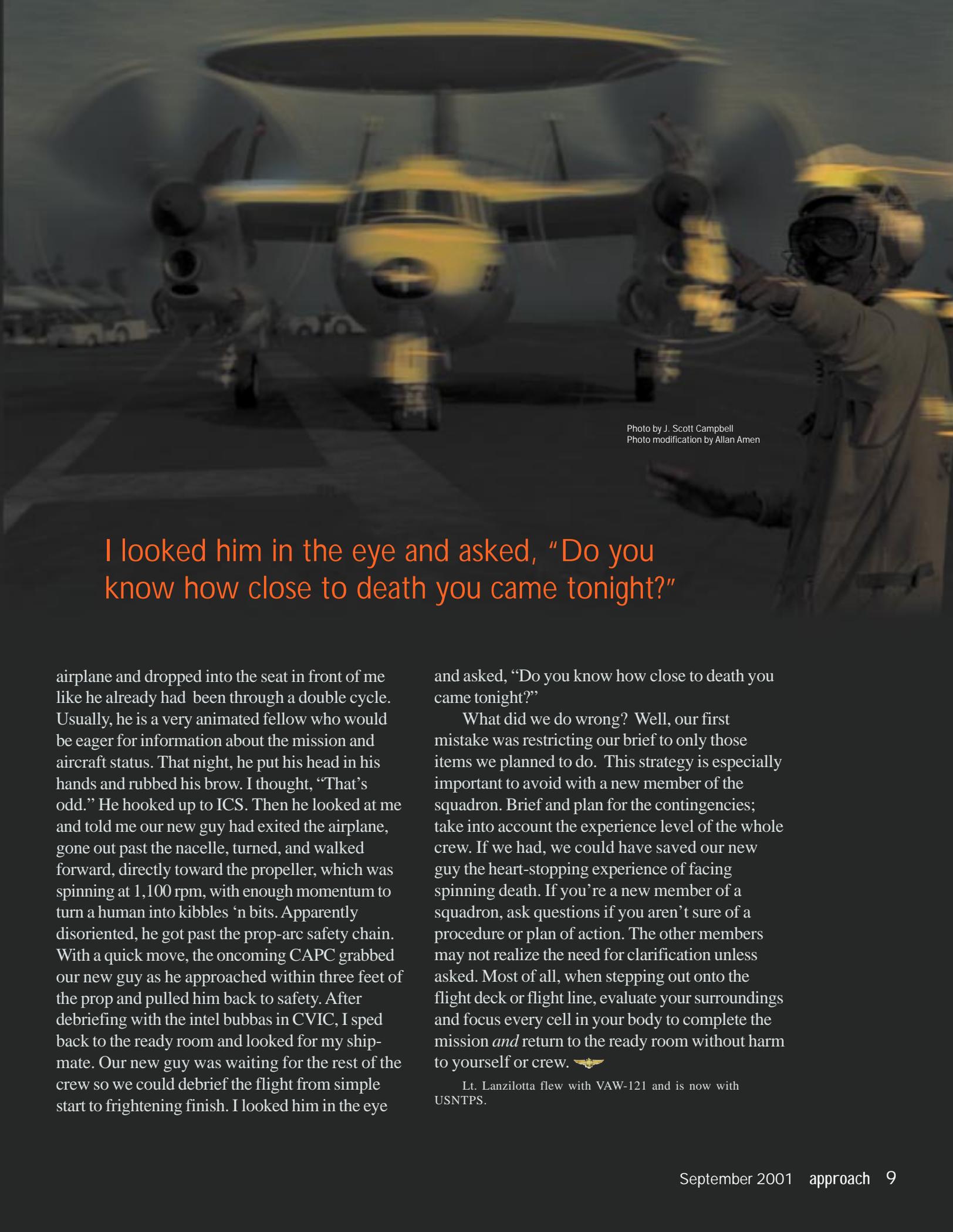


Photo by J. Scott Campbell  
Photo modification by Allan Amen

## I looked him in the eye and asked, “Do you know how close to death you came tonight?”

airplane and dropped into the seat in front of me like he already had been through a double cycle. Usually, he is a very animated fellow who would be eager for information about the mission and aircraft status. That night, he put his head in his hands and rubbed his brow. I thought, “That’s odd.” He hooked up to ICS. Then he looked at me and told me our new guy had exited the airplane, gone out past the nacelle, turned, and walked forward, directly toward the propeller, which was spinning at 1,100 rpm, with enough momentum to turn a human into kibbles ‘n bits. Apparently disoriented, he got past the prop-arc safety chain. With a quick move, the oncoming CAPC grabbed our new guy as he approached within three feet of the prop and pulled him back to safety. After debriefing with the intel bubbas in CVIC, I sped back to the ready room and looked for my shipmate. Our new guy was waiting for the rest of the crew so we could debrief the flight from simple start to frightening finish. I looked him in the eye

and asked, “Do you know how close to death you came tonight?”

What did we do wrong? Well, our first mistake was restricting our brief to only those items we planned to do. This strategy is especially important to avoid with a new member of the squadron. Brief and plan for the contingencies; take into account the experience level of the whole crew. If we had, we could have saved our new guy the heart-stopping experience of facing spinning death. If you’re a new member of a squadron, ask questions if you aren’t sure of a procedure or plan of action. The other members may not realize the need for clarification unless asked. Most of all, when stepping out onto the flight deck or flight line, evaluate your surroundings and focus every cell in your body to complete the mission *and* return to the ready room without harm to yourself or crew. 🦅

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