

A fighter jet is shown in flight against a backdrop of a blue sky with scattered white clouds. The jet is positioned in the upper left quadrant of the frame, angled towards the right. The title 'How Close' is written in a large, bold, dark blue font across the upper right portion of the image.

How Close

By Lt. David Bowen

It was the perfect hop. Red air lead, KC-10 fuel opportunity, and about 10 minutes to get in a good fight before returning to the boat. My wingman, a nugget pilot who had been in the squadron over a year, would join me for the hop. This good deal was the kind that puts a sinister grin on your face when you get up in the morning and read the flight schedule. We briefed the game plan and contingencies, grabbed some chow, and walked to the flight deck to a pair of FA-18s.

After a few uneventful air-to-air engagements, my wingman and I got in a quick 1 v 1, to burn down the robust fuel load we still had and to have a little fun doing it. We fought a good fight down to the hard deck, knocked off, and headed home. My tanks indicated about 6,500 pounds, more than enough gas to get us home and make maximum-ramp weight. We couldn't have another engagement because recovery time fast approached. I scoffed at the thought of dumping extra gas, rather than using it for something worthwhile. Fuel would become an issue in a matter of minutes.

We headed for the marshal stack. I initiated a running rendezvous and checked us in with strike. Everything seemed normal. My wingman joined on bearing line from a mile away. The descent checks were completed, and I began to savor the thought of finishing this hop with a pair of OK 3-wires. Once I was convinced we were headed to the right piece of sky, I started

Is Too Close?

I nervously listened to strike vector my wingman. He finally was on his way. My approach and landing was uneventful, with the exception of some trim problems and no AOA indications. The LSO helped me maintain glide slope as I touched down and came to a stop. I taxied clear, shut down, and gathered my senses. My hands stopped shaking two hours later.

Meanwhile, my wingman fought his own battle. Another Hornet had joined and helped guide him to the divert field 100 miles away. I lost track of his situation when I shut down on deck. I heard my wingman had landed safely in Kuwait.

After discussions back at the boat, I realized my wingman simply had lost sight of me for an instant when he looked inside at his instruments. When he again looked outside during the descent, I had disappeared under his leading-edge extension. When he dipped his right wing to see where I was, it looked to me like a collision was imminent.

We've all had close calls in the air, and we sometimes attribute them to being lucky, rather than good. First and foremost, the fact I am writing this and still can buy my wingman a cold one at the club is testament to how fortunate we were that day. Things could have been much worse if the collision had been more direct. Perhaps the most important practical lesson learned is the use of that dreaded call, "blind," over the radio. That word sometimes is looked at as a sign of bad airmanship and an inability to fly tactical formations with competence—usually not the case at all.

Environmental conditions can be tough, and the task saturation of a single-seat FA-18 easily can cause the most experienced aircrew to lose sight. Better to confess and work to regain sight, than to wait and see if our lead reappears. As far as execution of the emergency procedures is concerned, we opted to stay together loosely, even though we briefed immediate separation after a midair. This decision was key to pooling our resources and working through the problem together. We both were controllable and felt we added a comforting reality check to each other until help arrived.

Having the extra gas allowed my wingman to reach his divert field. My hesitancy to send him there right away might have wasted some of his fuel as we circled the boat. This situation was an emergency and divert was the right answer.

A feature of the Hornet allows the pilot to select one of the two AOA probes, which still was functional, and to set the flaps at a default-landing configuration. This option, however, never crossed my mind as my pea-sized brain concentrated on getting aboard.

The call to strike got the attention of key personnel aboard the carrier. They mobilized a support network and vectored help to my wingman as I struggled with my emergency. Keeping a secret was the last thing I should have done.

Brief a solid midair contingency, and don't be afraid to confess if you lose sight of each other. Make the necessary calls when an emergency arises and get the right people involved. 

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