



By Lt. Timothy Buller,  
VAW-120

**T**here we were—a group of finely tuned, combat-hardened, Hawkeye aviators about to enjoy our first weekend at Air Wing Fallon. Everything was packed—the skis, the boots, the API-issued naval aviator web belts, and our eager expectations. We had everything we needed, except our common sense.

We spent Saturday and Sunday schussing down the glorious slopes of South Lake Tahoe, and the weather couldn't have been better. Without a cloud in the sky or a breeze through the trees, the ski lifts took us to the top of the mountain. It was after the first couple of hours of wicked aerials and mogul assaults when we heard someone express the first concern about our developing skin condition. "Wow! You're looking a little red," someone said.

The unanimous reply was, "Quit wanking, and ski. We're fine!"

None of us had had the foresight to bring sun block, and none of us planned to buy any. This juvenile and disrespectful attitude for the sun and its capabilities plagued us the remainder of the weekend. The reality of our lack of common sense had yet to sink in, or should I say, bubble up.

An all-officers meeting was scheduled for Sunday evening to discuss the upcoming missions and tactical importance we were to play in the scheduled evolutions. Once the CO saw the cherry-red, blistered faces on nearly half his junior officers, however, the plans changed. The pain of our weekend carelessness was just starting, and the heat emanating from our faces was matched only by the disappointment shown in the faces of all our seniors. The outlook was bleak for any of us sunburned aviators to get airborne anytime in the near future, let alone in the 10 short hours before morning.

By 0600, the pain was unbearable, and six of the eight of us frantically rushed to see the flight doc—"cancer facemasks" intact. The prognosis wasn't good. We had to apply many lotions and ointments. Then came the bomb: We couldn't fly for four days! Our worst nightmare had come true. Our lack of common sense and responsibility buried the squadron in a hole of double pumping four pilots and three mission commanders so we could meet our mission-support requirements.

Something as simple as applying sun block could have averted an entire week of hardship for the aircrewmembers involved in the ski trip, as well as those who had to pick up the slack to ensure mission success.

Our message is simple: Be smart, and never underestimate the power of Mother Nature. If I had followed that advice, I wouldn't have let down the other aircrewmembers who count on me, and I wouldn't be one step closer to skin cancer. ■

*The author was assigned to VAW-117 when he wrote this article.*