

BALANCING

# Risk & Mission

By Capt Mike Straight

What level of risk should we accept during training?

Photo by SrA D. Myles Cullen

*This article first appeared in the August 1985 edition of TAC ATTACK and was authored by Capt Mike "Boa" Straight. Throughout his career, Boa had a strong ability to safely accomplish a mission with great results. What Boa wrote in 1985 still holds true for how we must train today and it shows us that using the principles of ORM is nothing new.*

**A**s fighter aircrews, one of the tougher judgments we are paid to make is determining the acceptable balance between mission accomplishment and risk to our equipment and ourselves. Obviously, this judgment plays a major role in developing our wartime tactics and game plans, but this proper mission versus risk balance is just as crucial to our peacetime training.

In combat, the specific mission objectives may make the level of acceptable risk fairly clear. For example, an offensive MiG sweep normally requires employing lower risk tactics than a defensive Combat Air Patrol (CAP) of your own airfield. But in our peacetime training, the proper trade-off of risk versus mission is less clear. To ensure victory in the next air war, we've got to prepare now with realistic and demanding training. But the more realistic the training, the more we risk our priceless

people and very expensive equipment. To be truly prepared for our wartime missions, should we accept combat levels of risk during training? Or is all training risk unacceptable in order to conserve our resources for the actual shooting? The right answer obviously lies between these two extremes, and only a thorough understanding of the training priorities and risk will allow us to judge the proper balance.

As fighter crews involved in daily air-to-air and air-to-ground training, we control both sides of this balance: the level of training risk, and the training gained from acceptable risk.

We control risk by judging the limits of realism in our training. Many of the hard limits of realism are specified in published guidance such as the air-to-air training Rules of Engagement (ROE). By specifying minimum altitudes, airspeeds, separations, etc.,

these guidelines provide some definitions to the line between realism and risk, and represent our commanders' judgment of acceptable risk. But even these well-defined limits require aircrew judgment in their application. For example, with two fighters approaching head-on with 1,200 knots of closure, the maneuver required to comply with the 500-foot minimum separation ROE is based on an experienced judgment, not an easily observable gauge read-out. Training guidance, like ROE, attempts to define absolute peacetime boundaries between realism and risk. But we determine, for each sortie, whether mission specifics and aircrew experience warrant operating on the dictated edge or at some level short of it.

The other side of the training equation we are paid to control is training effectiveness. We control what is gained from the risks of daily training. Our training must be demanding — we must be capable of effectively taking our equipment and ourselves to the peacetime limits. But it is up to us to ensure that training on the edge provides maximum payoff. We must understand specifically what is to be gained for all risk we accept.

Our handle on this is our selection of and adherence to training objectives tailored to each sortie. Effective training objectives identify where we plan to push ourselves and what we expect to gain from the risks of the mission. By adhering to the objectives during the sortie, we avoid wasting time, fuel, and risk on less pertinent aspects of the sortie. For example, basic fighter maneuvers entail a certain level of risk; but they are essential for any competent fighter crew. But a prolonged 1-v-1 scissors is an inappropriate increase in risk in a sortie where the objectives and resources are designed for four-ship employment. Obviously, any risks taken solely for personal entertainment or ego satisfaction are unacceptable.

Risk is part of what we do for a living, war or peace, but it's not simply an aspect of luck or chance. Instead, it's a mission element that must be evaluated and controlled much like fuel or weapons load. And though many of the peacetime limits of acceptable risk are spelled out in our training guidance, the major responsibility for balancing the risk versus mission equation falls to the guy with his finger on the trigger. ▶



Photo by SSgt Shane Cuomo



Photo by Cecilio M. Ricardo, Jr.



Photo by SSgt Bennie Davis III



**We manage risk in both combat and in peacetime training ...**