

An Iranian Patrol

By Lt. Cliff Rauschenberg

Most fleet aviators who have spent a summer in the Persian Gulf are familiar with the heat and haze typical of the region. The reduced visibility often forces the ship to use Case III recovery procedures. To those not familiar with a Case III recovery, it is an instrument approach, followed by a straight-in. However, on rare occasions in the Persian Gulf, the environmental conditions support Case I procedures. A Case I has pilots stack themselves overhead and wait their turn to come in for the break. On this day, while flying in support for OSW, my wingman and I got the good news that Mom was calling for a Case I recovery.

While in the overhead stack at 3,000 feet awaiting recovery, the new mini-boss made a frantic call over tower frequency announcing an Iranian patrol boat was rapidly approaching the carrier from the port side—eight miles out. Of course, my lead and I jumped at the call and told the mini-boss we would check it out. Following CV NATOPS procedures, we went outside of 10 miles and descended to 1,000 feet. We turned on our FLIRs and slaved them to the surface contact.

Unlike most days when flying the Hornet on cruise, my lead and I had gas to spare, so we opted to accelerate to 480 knots. This would

make sure we had enough smack on the jet to maneuver in case the patrol vessel decided to take a potshot at us. Our heads were buried in the cockpit trying to sweeten the FLIR image, so we would have good video footage to show. We lost our situational awareness of the other aircraft in the overhead stack. Besides, they were supposed to be stacked above us, as outlined in the airwing's SOP.

Meanwhile, a section of F-14s made a call to tower requesting a flyby. Since the launch was delayed, the boss granted the Tomcats permission. My wingman and I heard the conversation but did not really pay much attention. We were too focused on getting FLIR footage of the Iranian-patrol boat.

All of a sudden, out of the corner of my eye, I saw two Tomcats come screaming down through the section. I screamed, "Watch it, two Toms! Get your nose down!"



Boat? Where?



My lead stuffed the nose down without question, resulting in a 50-foot pass. Both of us were shaken up. The Tomcat pilots were unfazed—they never saw us.

We learned several lessons and realized the fault was with them and us. My lead and I should have practiced a better visual lookout. As a single-seat pilot, it is easy to get distracted and forget the basics.

Both of us disregarded proper mission-crosscheck times because we were too focused on becoming the heroes of the day. Yes, the Hornet has an effective air-to-air radar, but that shouldn't trump a good visual lookout, especially in a Case I, VFR-holding pattern.

The Tomcats violated procedures by descending through the overhead stack inside of 10 miles. At times, the rules set forth by NATOPS are cumbersome, but as professionals, we trust they are there for a reason. If all aircrew involved had kept their heads on a swivel and abided by NATOPS that day over the Persian Gulf, this near-collision could have been avoided. 🦅

Lt. Rauschenberg flies with VFA-15.

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