



### Close Call!

“The bogey is at 40 miles. Turn left to 090.” The bogey in this case is an F-18 jet fighter flown by a Marine Corps general that I had talked to on the phone a couple of hours earlier about the ROE, or rules of engagement. This was an air-to-air mission where I was flying the F-16 out of our National Guard base near Columbia, South Carolina, and he had taken off from the Marine Corps Air Station in Beaufort, South Carolina.

It is always fun flying against dissimilar fighters. Like the athletic teams that practice against each other, you know the skills of your teammates and how they will react in certain situations. Flying against a different airplane whose capabilities are not fully known is a different story. And, of course you don't know the pilot. Like actors, singers, athletes, and leaders, the skill levels of fighter pilots vary considerably. What if you went to the golf course, was invited to play a high stakes game with strangers, and found out on the first tee Tiger Woods was on the opposing side? What if, by chance, you were flying against Chuck deVlaming or Bill Holverstott, the world's greatest fighter pilots? We were to fly to separate points 40 miles apart in a military flying area over the Atlantic about 100 miles east of Charleston. He was talking to his controller over a discreet frequency, and I was doing the same with mine, yet we could talk to each other over a common frequency when the “fight was on.”

“He is on your nose at 30 miles.” I went to full afterburner and ramped my speed up past the speed of sound. I'm looking at the radar trying to get a “hit,” one last check of fuel, engine instruments, and sun angle.

A few seconds later, “He is at 25 miles.” Things are starting to happen fast now as the closure rate is about 25 miles per minute.

At 20 miles I call, “Judy”. The call means I have radar contact. The controller goes silent as I take control of the intercept, trying to figure attack angles, altitudes, airspeeds, and tactics to try to maneuver to his six o'clock position. I am also trying to decipher the radar, looking for signs he is making a flanking turn or changing his altitude or airspeed, which may dictate a change at the last second of my maneuvering. It is a supersonic game of cat and mouse, which in most cases ends passing head-on at a combined closure rate of 1,500 miles per hour and culminating in the classic dogfight covering 30,000 feet vertically and several miles laterally. The adrenaline is pumping and it brings out the competitive spirit like nothing I have ever experienced.

It also crossed my mind that this cagey old Marine might have, unbeknownst to me, on his way out to fly, grabbed some young lieutenant, and said, “Saddle up son, we're going hunting for some National Guard meat!” He may have a wingman in close formation on the ingress so only one hit is on the radar, making me think there is only one fighter. At the last second the lieutenant is cleared off and

now its two-on-one. And I'm the one! Now we are really having fun!

In a training environment, for safety reasons the rules of engagement state very clearly that you cannot vacate your assigned altitude block without radar contact and you cannot enter your adversary's altitude block without actually seeing his fighter. Additionally, the rule states clearly that you cannot penetrate a cloud layer. At about 15 miles, only 20 seconds from the "merge," I overfly a huge overcast layer a couple thousand feet below me that extended in my opponent's direction. I was just about to key the mic to "knock it off for weather" when an F-18 came out of the cloud bank, belly-up and almost vertical.

It is impossible to say exactly how close we came to a mid-air collision. It is safe to say that it was my closest call ever, and had he started his turn a nanosecond later than he did, there would have been a fireworks display that could have been seen 250 miles back at home plate, as two fully gassed jet fighters, both past the speed of sound, collided. It was one of those moments that literally takes your breath away and lets you know your luck is still holding out, but for how long?

We changed altitude to avoid the weather and ran two more engagements without incident, although I was paying a little more attention than usual! The plan was for me to land in Beaufort, debrief the flight, and fly home in the afternoon.

As in any organization, middle managers dealing with someone at the top can be tricky. Imagine the president of Toyota interfacing with the service manager of a local dealership, or the president of Bank of America in an important discussion with an assistant branch manager. The gulf in prestige, experience, money, power, most likely age, and position is enormous. There can be and usually is some measure of intimidation, normally unintended, occasionally not.

The same was true with me that day as I walked from my jet to the ready-room to debrief the general who obviously had trampled the basic rules of engagement and nearly caused an accident of cataclysmic proportions. And the strangest part of all is that the general coming up through the cloud cover belly-up to me had no clue what had happened. Just how am I going to communicate this?

I have tried my best to abide by the idea of the "rankless debrief." Outside the briefing room, all senior officers were accorded their due respect, but inside the briefing room we had an obligation to lay out the good, the bad, and the ugly, especially where safety of flight was concerned. The good senior officers, the professional leaders who cared, would listen and be appreciative of information that was important, whether it was safety of flight or the poor service at the base snack bar. The great leaders were also willing to admit they made a mistake. And most important, when a mistake was made they weren't spring-loaded to the blame position, but defaulted immediately to "let's fix it and move on." I am glad to say I met another great leader that day. We looked at the film and re-learned a valuable lesson about letting the excitement of the moment overcome our common sense.

The unprofessional ones (thankfully, they were a small minority), the ones with big egos who thought they could do no wrong, would react in the way you would expect. It did not take more than one flight to figure out which category they belonged in.

Around this time is when I figured out that "leader" is not a position on the organizational chart. You can be made a supervisor, manager, senator, general or president by the stroke of a pen. You cannot be made a **leader** by the stroke of a pen. Your position on the organizational chart only gives you one thing – your position on the organizational chart. One thing it will never, ever give you is the term "leader". That has to be earned.

### **The Leadership Challenge**

Encourage the rankless debrief. If you continue to shoot the messenger, the messengers will soon figure out the key to harmony with you is their silence. When they go silent, along with their respect for you, you have just choked off the very pipeline of information that may one day prevent the accident of cataclysmic proportions, or the demise of your department and/or your organization.

I encourage your response to these thoughts. [farlgroup@aol.com](mailto:farlgroup@aol.com)

Have a great day!

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