

FLIRTING WITH A MISHAP



WHEN FAILURE IS NOT AN OPTION

BY MR. NED LINCH

9Gs

in an F-16 forces you down into your seat compressing your spine, overstresses every muscle in your body, squeezes the sweat from every pore, ruptures thousands of capillaries in your forearms, drives blood downward to the feet, and stretches your face instantly aging your appearance 50 years. As the sweat burns your eyes and the Gs restrict your vision, you persevere, adapt, and maintain the focus on flying the jet, straining every major muscle group in your body, and properly breathing with quick bursts of air exchanges while not giving up the fight.

It's all about man and machine against an opponent and a three-dimensional skill in flux at all times with no definitive answer to any questions on the subject ... just lots of opinions and techniques. In the end, killing the bandit with your gun is all that really matters in a dogfight; otherwise you've failed in your mission as a fighter pilot and *failure is not an option!*





THERE I WAS ... IN A DOGFIGHT

over the frigid waters of the Yellow Sea, 60 miles off the coast of The Kun (Kunsan Air Base, South Korea) with the smell of burning oil leaking into the cockpit. Should I knock-it-off (KIO) or continue pressing the attack? I've smelled this oily, humid air many times after flying a jet that had recently been in maintenance. It should be OK, right? Failure is not an option! After a nanosecond of rationalizing, I elected to continue with tunnel vision, my "fangs" out, and pulling aggressively to gun my opponent, the Vice Wing Commander. Bad move.

As I carved through the skies in my Viper, the burning smell intensified to a point that it distracted me from focusing on fighting and pulling Gs. The logical side of my brain finally engaged and I knocked-it-off, started climbing, and pointing my nose toward home. Good call, especially since the oil pressure reading was now less than 10 PSI which means LAND ASAP! To point toward home first and then analyze the situation is a built-in flight discipline reaction. However, I should have knocked-it-off earlier before allowing my fangs to control my decision making. About all I could do at this point was point toward home, climb, use minimal throttle movements, and pray because failure (ejecting into the frigid waters) was not an option.

It seemed like an eternity before reaching a 1:1 (the rule-of-thumb glide ratio for the F-16 which is 1 mile for every 1,000' of altitude) with Kunsan. Finally, I could relax just enough to allow the seat cushion to reform in the seat. After circling down from high key in idle power and landing the jet, maintenance said I had about 1 minute left on the engine before it would have seized. It was another lucky day and the Lord was keenly watching over me.

The human body is able to detect stimuli long before the mind has consciously put it all together. It should be cut and dry, but the wiring in our brains prevents conscious, logical thought during critical and urgent moments. If something doesn't look, smell, and/or sound right, then it's time to KIO. Electing to continue with a known problem is a crapshoot game and a balance between risk and reward.



“There I was” 7 years later, on a night Operation IRAQI FREEDOM combat mission over a ragging sandstorm with troops desperately calling for help. I was faced with the decision of my life. To press and fly beyond the limits of my aircraft and all established rules of engagement or leave these men behind who were being overrun by a numerically superior force. The weather was not conducive to flying an F-16 at night in a sandstorm with zero illumination for our Night Vision Goggles. Without hesitation, my wingman and I elected to continue and descend into the storm where we repeatedly descended below safe altitudes to attack the enemy in near zero visibility conditions. In the end, the troops escaped and were later rescued. We survived through pure will power to not

fail; however, it was a balancing act between emotion and logical thought. It was the toughest night of my entire career to balance life with a group of men that I will never know. This was not a situation to KIO for safety and danger. We were deep in enemy territory and no one else was there to help. If a kid was drowning in your pool, you’d jump in regardless of the risk. This night required us to abandon all established rules to complete the mission. We had to act now because *failure was not an option*.

A few years after the war “There I was again” ... this time I was in my experimental Vans RV-4. Ironically, I was trying to make it home from a funeral with evening thunderstorms along our route. With my 4-year-old daughter in my backseat, I elected to continue home in the dark and land on a dimly lit grass strip surrounded by tall trees. I can still see my daughter’s face lit up by the lightning from nearby clouds. As I reflect on that evening, I’ll admit that I allowed my fangs or emotions to control my decision making in order to get home that evening. Although I mitigated the risk with experience, flight following, extra fuel and remaining VFR over major highways, this was a bad move and I swore I’d never do that again.



Photo by: A1C Nick Wilson



Photo by: TSgt Michael R. Holzworth

Recent mishaps validate you must keep the focus and discipline to balance out the brain's weaknesses to prevent rash decisions.

- The SOF notified the crew that sparks were coming from the right side of the aircraft and remnants of tires were found on the runway; however, all indications were good in the cockpit so they elected to continue. Significant damage to an engine was the end result.
- The crew didn't think the thunderstorm activity was that bad and elected to continue ... significant damage to the aircraft was the end result.
- All warning systems were screaming at the pilot to pull up, but he elected to continue the attack into the ground.
- The pilot was fatigued beyond his physical limits, but he elected to continue and experienced Type 3 spatial disorientation that took his life.
- The crew experienced a hard landing and elected to continue with a touch-and-go followed by a full stop. Instead of writing up the hard landing, they did a crew change. The second crew found significant damage after their mission.
- The crew felt a rumble, heard a pop and a bang; however, all looked fine on the instruments so they elected to continue until the engine came apart.
- After a firm landing, the crew noticed a vibration as they taxied, so they continued taxiing the jet versus stopping. This caused significantly more damage to the aircraft.
- The tower noticed a fireball coming from one of the engines. The crew was notified and said all indications were normal in the cockpit. So they elected to continue until the engine completely failed and were further away from the base.
- The flight safety NCO recommended changing the tire; however, the crew elected to continue without changing the tire. The tire disintegrated on takeoff causing engine FOD and damage ... another mishap for no reason.
- The crew elected to continue with excessive fatigue and lost the focus when it was time to land ... they forgot the gear despite all the warning systems screaming at them.

How many times does it take for someone to press the fuel, the weather, a maintenance problem, and/or fatigue before learning a lesson? History repeats itself and the only way we can break this mentality is for pilots and aircrew to avoid continuing the flight when things aren't right.

I challenge you to avoid flirting with mishaps and develop a mindset to knock-it-off versus trapping yourself with tunnel vision and letting your fangs control your decision making when things don't look, sound, or smell right because *failure is never an option.* 🗡️

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