

## Refueling Fiasco

A pair of F/A-18 *Hornets* launched on an air-to-air refueling flight with an Air Force tanker. The wingman joined on the leader's right wing in spread formation, in which the wingman flies one nautical mile abeam the lead at the same altitude. The flight sighted the tanker and began a descending, left-hand turn to arrive three miles in trail of the tanker.

During the turn the wingman positioned himself in loose cruise in right echelon in anticipation of establishing a "starboard observation" position off the tanker. The *Hornets* accelerated to close on the tanker. The leader asked the tanker to start a left turn to expedite the join-up. The tanker then cleared the flight to port observation (a position on the left side of the tanker from which the pilots could clearly see the tanker before moving in for in-flight refueling) and began a turn to the left.

The wingman did not hear the tanker's transmission directing the flight to the port side. Using nonstandard language, the leader told the wingman to "Match me on the left." The wingman assumed this meant the leader wanted him in the spread position, one mile abeam the leader and on his left.

The leader, meanwhile, assumed the wingman was moving to a loose cruise position off his left wing to rendezvous and to establish port observation. In fact, the wingman



moved to a slightly acute position .6 miles off the leader's left wing. As the flight leader began a left turn, the wingman realized he was acute and out of position. He began reducing power to work himself into a loose cruise position in left echelon.

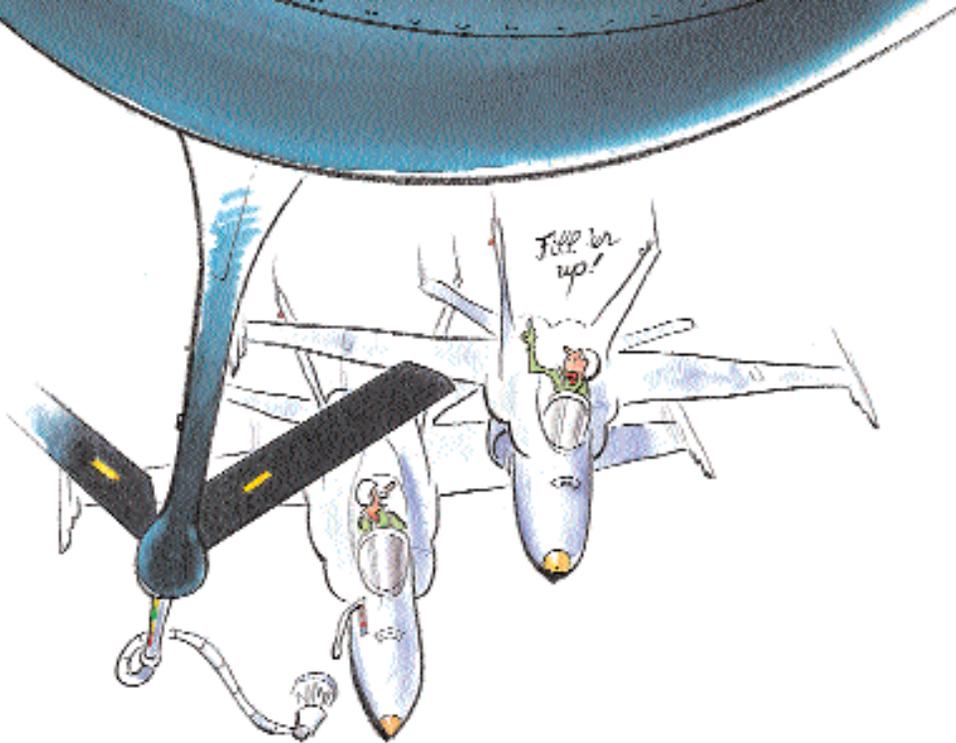
The wingman came back to idle power and used the speed brake to continue to work to a position left and aft of the flight leader at his altitude. Midway through the turn, the sun moved to a position behind

the leader, which degraded the wingman's ability to judge distance and closure rate.

The wingman did not attempt to break plane with the sun because he was attempting to maintain the same altitude as the flight leader. The leader was in the port observation position while still in the turn and reported to the tanker, "Port observation position achieved." The tanker cleared the flight to switch to the boom operator's frequency. The wingman changed frequencies, saw the leader starting to roll wings level and began a roll to wings level himself.

The wingman glanced at the tanker and then looked at the leader. He noticed excessive closure and constant bearing with the leader. The wingman pulled full aft on the stick thinking he would pass above the leader. The aircraft collided causing damage to the left wing, left side fuselage and left vertical stabilizer on the leader's *Hornet*.

The wingman's aircraft sustained damage to its underside and to the left trailing edge flap and left horizontal stabilizer. The planes separated and headed toward home base. The leader landed safely, making a short field arrestment. The wingman proceeded to an alternate airfield but while slowing the aircraft through 170 knots, with the gear down, the aircraft rolled rapidly right and the pilot ejected. The pilot was picked up by a search and rescue helo and was not injured.



*Turmoil at the trough*



**Grampaw Pettibone says:**

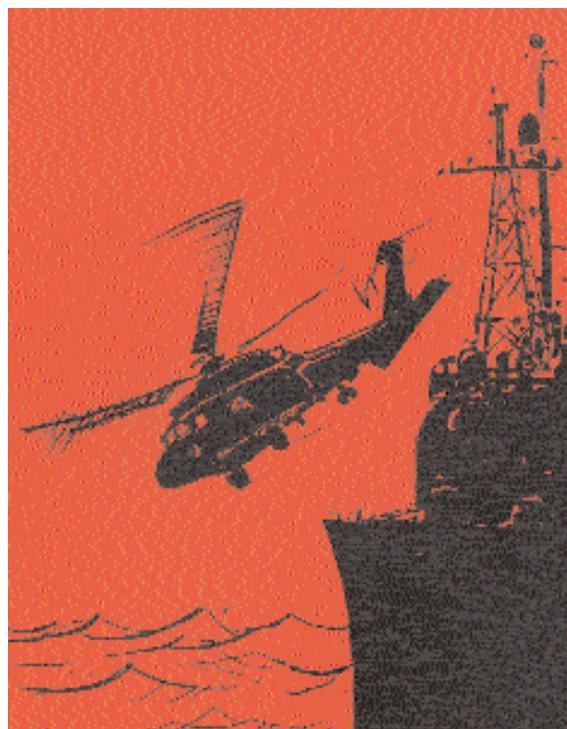
Great horned toads. What's "Match me on the left" supposed to mean? Here the *Hornets* are, in a critical phase of the mission closing in on the tanker, and the leader fails to give clear-cut instructions to the wingman. You've got one huge bird up there plus the *Hornets*, all in a relatively confined space. This is no time for creative, nonstandard language.

Wingmen on the receiving end of such transmissions have every right to challenge them. But they oughta remember another cardinal rule: Whatever you do, fly your airplane safely—and that means avoid risky proximity to other birds in the same section of sky. Basic airmanship, folks.

## Fatal Fatigue

An SH-60F *Seahawk* launched at twilight as part of a two-helicopter sea-air-land team insertion mission. The flight was also assigned to make unaided (without night vision devices, or NVDs) landings on a

guided missile frigate for an intermediate fuel stop on both the outbound and return legs of the mission. Both aircraft conducted uneventful, unaided landings aboard the frigate on the outbound leg. On the post-insertion return leg, the



crew transitioned from aided (with NVDs) to unaided flight and began an approach to the frigate. The aircraft commander in the left seat was at the controls.

During the approach the aircraft drifted left of centerline, eventually regained lineup, but went high on glideslope. The aircraft then crossed the stern of the ship extremely high, flew over the hangar bay and crashed in the water approximately 100 feet off the starboard bow. The impact occurred four hours and 46 minutes from the time of takeoff. The two pilots and two aircrewmembers were killed, the aircraft lost.



**Grampaw Pettibone says:**

For starters, the pilot in command of the *Seahawk* was not currently qualified for night, clear-deck landings on small combatants. That's like starting a game and being 7 points behind before kickoff. This was a tough, long mission and it could be that all the crew members were suffering from some degree of fatigue. This could have led to their not allowing enough time to transition from NVD-aided flight to unaided flight for the demanding night approach to the ship.

There's no question that landing a helicopter on a small section of deck at night on a moving ship is one of the most challenging evolutions in Naval Aviation. Not having the necessary qualifications, being tired and changing from one mode of vision to another make it that much more difficult—and unforgiving. Operational risk management would have highlighted the scheduling shortfalls of this flight. What a terrible loss.