

GASCI

General Aviation Safety Council of Ireland



My friend Learned about Flying from that..

This story is about a runway incident that happened many years ago in a military setting. The lessons, however, are worth considering whatever you fly; they are also relevant to Air Traffic Controllers.

Once upon a time I used to fly single-seat multi-role jet fighters. It was a tremendously exciting, highly competitive and demanding business. Life on a squadron was busy; we practiced a wide variety of roles (just about everything you could do with a fast jet) and had regular deployments. Constantly changing personnel and a strict 'qualification' regime – a bit like type or class rating renewals in the 'outside' world - meant there was always someone to be trained, a skill to be honed or a qualification to be renewed.

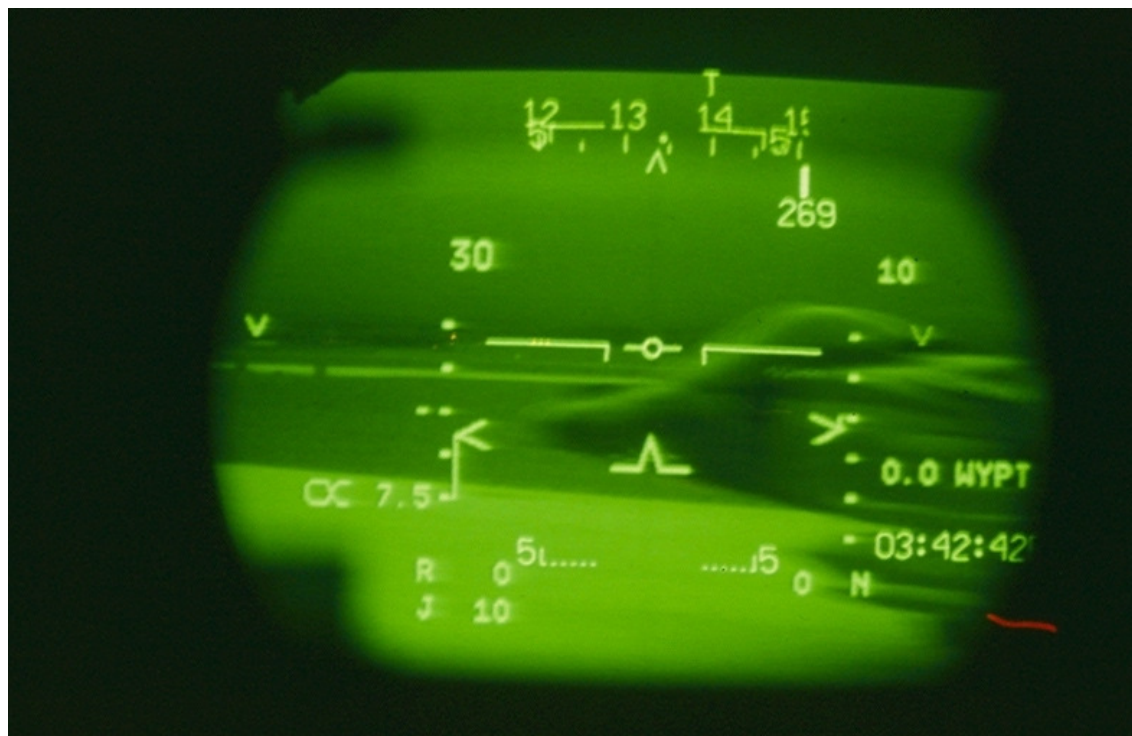
I was a senior Squadron pilot, one of a few who had just about all the 'ticks in the box' after 12 years of almost non-stop 'front-line' flying. I was responsible for the supervision of a couple of newly arrived pilots who were progressing through their 'on the job' training to get to what we called 'Combat Ready' status.

The Squadron had deployed for a period of intensive training to a remote airfield known for its constant mist and low cloud, however, the low-flying around that area was great and we had no distractions. I was programmed to fly as number 4 of a 4-aircraft formation with one of the junior pilots leading. We operated in pairs, the Squadron Commander was number 2 and my leader, number 3, was another 'new guy'. This was normal practice; the less experienced guys flew as the leader in a pair to gain experience; the more experienced pilots authorised, supervised and debriefed the mission. Our sortie that day was a complicated mix of low level simulated ground attacks on a couple of simulated off-range targets and a high priority, timed, low-level run at an offshore weapons range where we would drop a small practice bomb. This would be scored for accuracy and time. We had also organised some air defence fighters from another base to intercept us en-route. All navigation was done on map and stopwatch (GPS was still in its infancy) so as you can imagine, the planning and briefing for such a mission took many hours.

We eventually walked out to our aircraft and strapped in with the canopies closed to keep out the rain. The weather was awful, but we were told it cleared up a few miles inland, so we had briefed a pairs instrument departure. Eventually we lined up, me and my mate at the threshold, the other 2 about 1000 ft along. We had 2 radios and 2 transmit switches, box one was normally used for external comms while box 2 was used for internal formation messages. The ATC folk at this airfield were not used to the way we operated and tended to let us get on with things; they cleared us for take-off (they could not actually see us in the mist it turned out afterwards) and waited for our 'going en-route' call on the tower frequency.

Just as we were about to go, the 'Boss' (up front) called on box 2 - the 'internal' box - that he had an anti-skid failure and would have to 'wimp out'.. He was going to taxi along the runway and vacate. Our leader had briefed a 'loser' plan; basically it meant we were to get airborne as a 3-ship in 'V' formation which required us to renumber and 'shuffle up' to him. About 1 minute later (remember we were on a deadline) the new formation with lead in front, me close on the right and my mate on the left of the leader, was ready to roll. A few hand signals between us and off we went. A 3-ship close formation take-off in instrument conditions is a demanding exercise; the lead has to keep absolutely straight during the ground roll, fly smoothly and use a series of hand-signals and head nods to keep everyone glued to his wing. A wingman's job is to stick like glue whatever happens... mist, spray, different aircraft engine accelerations and crosswind all make life interesting on the take-off. You really don't want to lose sight of the leader.

Within a couple of seconds we were accelerating through 60 Kts. Standard procedure was that the leader would 'nod' his head a moment before he rotated. Just before the 'nod', and to this day I don't know why, I glanced forward through the green writing in the Head Up Display into the white mist. For just a split second I could not believe what I saw.....there was a tiny speck of red light in the middle of the green symbols against the white background.. ***The Boss was still on the runway!!*** He was right in front of me; my mind went into hyperdrive.. he was crawling along the right hand edge of the runway looking for the exit. If I called "formation abort" I would definitely hit him. If I said nothing and slowed a bit, steered left into lead's wake then kept going I might just miss him. That's what I did. I missed him by a couple of feet; it was a rough ride in the jet wake of the other 2. I thought about aborting, then I thought '*those guys are not allowed to fly as a pair, I have to supervise them*' (strange how your priorities can go haywire sometimes) so I opened the tap again and followed them. As I got airborne I called '**that was close!**' on the internal radio and off we went.



We carried on with the mission, it took me almost half an hour to get my heart rate back to normal, I was all over the place, found it hard to concentrate and flew along just shaking, not caring if the bad guys found me or if I even came close to the targets we had briefed.

The debrief was interesting, the Boss was furious that we had nearly taken him out. The poor young guy leading was almost ill in his mask as he got airborne – for a few seconds he thought he had just killed me and the boss; he had noticed me dropping back on the right then saw another jet flash past feet beyond his wing where I had just been. He was relieved to hear my ‘that was close!’ call.. The guy on the left was totally unaware of the drama until the debrief.

The world’s worst aviation disaster happened when 2 Jumbo Jets collided on a runway in poor visibility. We were lucky not to have had a mini version that day. Always beware of poor visibility conditions during take-off or landing. Rain on a windscreen can obscure your view forward, looking into a low sun through a dirty screen can be a problem. Clear communication with ATC is vital. Operating from strips where there is no ATC be sure to use the radio, even if you think there is no-one else around, especially if there is a bump in the runway that obscures an aircraft at the threshold from an adjoining taxiway. Finally, if you are in a rush and things start going pear-shaped, slow down; the ‘big picture’ is always hard to see when you are focused on the job in hand, but things are rarely so critical that we cannot spare a few minutes to communicate and think about the implications of a change of plan

