

Abort! Abort!

**Winners sometimes quit,
but quitters never win.**

by *Waldo Waldman*



The toughest Air Force mission of my life was not in combat. It wasn't even in the cockpit of an F-16. It was a mission I never flew.

It happened while I was en route to the United States from the Saudi Arabian desert. My wingmen and I were deployed there for two months flying missions to protect the southern "no-fly zone" of Iraq, and the deployment was over. It was time to head home.

Our initial destination was Moron, Spain, a quaint and picturesque city rich in history and stunning architecture. We would be spending several nights there resting and enjoying some downtime before continuing on to our home at Shaw Air Force Base, South Carolina.

Making the jump from Spain to Shaw entailed an eight-hour, non-stop flight. Everyone was excited to see our families and friends—everyone except me. You see, there was one thing that stood between me and those that I loved back home . . . the Atlantic Ocean. Would you believe that even with 2,700 flight hours and 11 years of flying, I am a claustrophobic? It's true. I almost died in a scuba diving accident some three years into my flying career, and it brought out this latent claustrophobia that I never knew I had. For most of my flying career, I struggled with infrequent, yet severe, panic attacks that lasted only a few minutes while flying under certain conditions. In particular, flights in heavy weather, at night, or over water caused symptoms that sometimes became panic as I fought the demons of my claustrophobia.

Fortunately, to that point in my career, I was able to overcome my fears and deal with my condition through intense focus and self-discipline. I never aborted a single mission and was a solid, dependable, and effective fighter pilot. However, we all have our breaking point, and this non-combat mission back to the United States

proved to be mine. Bottom line: The thought of being strapped into the cramped cockpit of my F-16 for eight hours of flying over the vast, deep blue ocean was almost debilitating.

The night before flying, my mind began racing as I thought about what I would do if I had a panic attack over the ocean at 20,000 feet. Would I be able to handle it as I had done in the past—or would I lose control?

If it came down to that, where would I land? If I had to bail out, who would find me in the middle of the sea? The contingencies were endless, and I didn't sleep a wink. When morning came, I was exhausted and sporting a splitting headache.

My seven wingmen and I conducted our pre-mission brief, strapped on our survival gear, and headed to our jets. I began my pre-flight checklist and thought to myself, "*What am I doing? Do I really need to fly this jet today? Is it that mission critical?*"

I knew I was not healthy and not rested. If I took off, I was destined to become a safety hindrance—not just to me, but also to my wingmen. Yet, what would they think if I quit this mission? They would think I was a wimp. How embarrassed would that make me feel? As I finished strapping in my jet and initiated the engine start procedures, I had to make a decision and make it now. Fly or don't fly—*take off or abort*. I couldn't do it. I had to abort this mission.

I made a call on the radio informing my wingmen that I was aborting the mission. I told my commander I felt lousy and that I doubted my ability to be a trusting wingman. He totally understood and, to my surprise, so did my wingmen. They didn't make a big deal about it. Nobody doubted my judgment or questioned my credibility. Another pilot who was set to fly home sideways in a cargo plane gladly volunteered to take my spot in the F-16. My

decision, it turned out, delayed the mission for only 45 minutes. After takeoff, things proceeded uneventfully all the way back to Shaw, and the mission was a success.

Knowing When to Quit

That night, I pondered my decision to abort that mission. At first, I thought of myself as a failure. I was disappointed that I gave in to my fear and let it beat me for the first time in my flying career. But after a few days and speaking to some trusted friends, I realized I had made the best possible decision. Instead of hanging on to that mission for the wrong reasons (my ego and fear of being embarrassed), I realized I actually made the right decision, not only for myself, but, more importantly, for the safety and well-being of the team. Since then, this lesson has been valuable on many occasions in my personal and professional life.

How many times have you found yourself in a situation where your ego or your selflessness was tested by the prospect of not carrying on? Did you do the right thing, or did you keep quiet due to fear of embarrassment or letting down your boss or co-workers? When it comes to the health and safety of your team on the job, you have to constantly ask the key question—"Is this a risk worth taking?" In a similar situation to the one that faced me in Spain, what will you do? Will you step up and do the right thing?

This is a dual challenge: Managers must commit to creating a culture of courage where it's OK to abort a mission, and employees must be accountable for doing what is right to promote health and safety.

Push it up! ■

Waldo Waldman was the closing keynote speaker at the Region IV VPPPA Conference in Orlando this June. Visit www.yourwingman.com or call 1-866-WALDO-16 (925-3616).