

Radio Check

Effective communication with your wingmen builds all-important Situational Awareness.

by *Waldo Waldman*

Two minutes has passed since we had changed radio frequencies, and I still hadn't heard from my wingmen. My flight lead still had not checked me in. Was there a problem I didn't know about? Did I turn to the right frequency? Was my radio broken? We were approaching the enemy's border, and I was getting really nervous.

Having no radio contact at 20,000 feet, separated from my wingmen by 10 miles on night combat mission in hostile Iraq territory was not an ideal situation. What if I lost my engine or was engaged by ground fire? How could I call for help?

Without my radio, there was no communication link to my wingmen. I felt naked and alone.

Suddenly my back-up VHF radio blared with the terse (yet comforting) sound of my flight lead: "2, come up 239.9." I responded with a "2" and changed frequencies immediately. My flight lead continued, "Vipers check!" We responded in a crisp, monotone cadence, "2, 3, 4." We were all marching to the same beat. My flight lead continued, "Vipers, FENCE-IN, Check Master-Arm Hot!" I flipped the master arm switch to the "Hot" position, knowing full well that my weapons were now ready to be fired. We were now one synchronized formation with a concise flight plan and a mission objective that was delivered in our pre-mission briefing. Our radios (in addition to our radar) were our link and "tied" us together. We were ready for battle.

Communication in training and combat is absolutely mission-critical. It ensures safety, keeps wingmen focused on their responsibilities, and builds awareness in rapidly changing environments. On every mission, fighter pilots:

1. Brief the mission to establish and communicate objectives, delegate responsibilities, analyze threats, and review contingency plans.

2. Establish a communication ("Comm")

game plan by confirming when and where we would change frequencies.

3. Brief a **back-up plan** in case communication fails (known as "radio out" procedures).

4. Ensure positive **two-way communication** is established during critical elements of a mission.

5. Debrief every mission to review lessons learned and reinforce training.

What's your "Comm Plan" with your wingmen? Are you taking the time to brief your missions? Do you ensure all team members are on the same wavelength and understand their roles, responsibilities, and objectives? Are you aware of those wingmen who may be on the wrong frequency? Most importantly, do you have a plan to get them back on target?

Checking in with your wingmen, listening to their questions, and understanding their challenges are fundamental components of teamwork and leadership. They are the cornerstones in building an environment of mutual support and trust. Effective communication creates an atmosphere of accountability and reduces stress. When people's problems are acknowledged and they know that help is available, they are more likely to admit mistakes to their wingmen and reveal safety hazards or dangerous work environments that can adversely affect the accomplishment of a mission.

Useful Communication Wingtips

As a leader, you should think about these communication "wingtips":

1. **Have a "mass briefing" at least once a month.** Gather your troops and communicate the latest trends, organizational goals, safety updates, customer initiatives, etc. Your wingmen need to hear important news—whether good or bad—from you first!

2. **Conduct feedback sessions on a consistent basis.** Sit down with your wingmen and let them know how they are doing.

Are they meeting your expectations? Ask them about their goals and what kinds of challenges they are facing. Solicit feedback on you as a leader. What would they like to see from you? Is the mission understood? Look for signs of confusion and resolve to eliminate them. If they aren't up to speed, let them know as soon as possible. Remember, leaders who worry about popularity ultimately fail.

3. **Walk the flight line.** Get your hands dirty with your wingmen! Spend time with them on the job and observe how they do business. Ask questions about their work challenges and personal lives. Show them you care.

4. **Debrief your missions.** Remove your "rank" and conduct a nameless, blameless, and rankless debrief after every critical mission. Find out whether objectives were met and analyze why they weren't. Search for trends and communicate these to the rest of your organization. Lessons learned should not rest solely in your squadron. Share them openly with your wingmen.

A "wingtip" warning: Don't use the tips above as a call to walk around lecturing the members of your team—it's all about give and take. One of the biggest critiques fighter pilots have of their wingmen is talking too much on the radio and not listening! We need to listen to build what we call Situational Awareness ("SA," for short). SA is the comprehensive understanding of the entire mission. It is based on weather, location of threats, position of your wingmen, fuel state, nearest suitable landing field, etc.

The best wingmen (leaders or new hires) are those who know when to speak and when to simply shut up and listen. They are the ones with the greatest SA. Your job in the world of health and safety is to build the best SA possible to meet the needs of your customers and internal wingmen, all while maintaining a safe and healthy work environment.

Push it up!® ■

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