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Walter E. "Ted" Carter Jr.
U.S. Navy, president@nebraska.edu

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CASE STUDY
THE IBAR BRIDGE ATTACK

Walter E. Carter, Jr.

Rear Admiral, United States Navy

In 1999, I was the commanding officer of the VF-14 'Tophatters', an F-14 squadron assigned to Carrier Air Wing Eight embarked in USS Theodore Roosevelt (CVN 71). We were flying F-14A Tomcats, the oldest Tomcats in the fleet, modified for the air-to-ground mission with the Low Altitude Navigation and Targeting Infra-Red for Night (LANTIRN) system. Departing in late March 1999 for a planned six-month deployment, we made a quick transit across the Atlantic Ocean with orders to be prepared for action in the Balkans. On 6 April, our squadron conducted combat operations in support of Operation Allied Force (North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and Operation Noble Anvil (USA) in Kosovo.

In an aviator's world, the first night of any combat action is intense and this particular night was no different. As one of the most senior naval flight officers in the air wing, I was tasked to lead the first naval strike into Pristina International Airport Adem Jashari, southwest of Pristina, Kosovo, to take out the fuel storage facility for Serbian fighter-attack aircraft (Mikoyans or MiGs). We were using laser-guided bombs (LGBs), which were new to the Tomcat and were not equipped with a Global Positioning System; in layman's terms, these LGBs could not 'self-navigate through the clouds'. Weapons of this design could be problematic because they required a human element, meaning a weapons systems flight officer who was trained to manually provide a laser on the target in clear weather for in-flight weapon guidance. This laser designation could be near impossible to perform in bad weather, and maintaining laser contact was very difficult in heavily defended areas if evasive manoeuvres were required. Although we were successful in destroying our target that first night, we found combat operations to be a human and technological challenge in the ensuing days.

Anti-aircraft artillery (AAA) and surface-to-air missiles (SAMs), such as SA-6s and SA-3s, engaged us heavily early on, but eventually the Serbs stopped shooting at us for fear that they would have their SAM sites targeted. As the air campaign evolved, we were forced to move from strategic to more tactical targets. Some of our aircrew were newly trained forward air controllers. This skill set, along with a high-resolution television screen in the rear cockpit, made the Tomcat a very capable and relevant platform in the tactical air-to-ground campaign.

We talked a lot about ethics and how the tactical situation on the ground affected our combat operations. Our entire chain of command stressed the importance of avoiding civilian casualties. We spoke in detail about weapons release – how our weapons officers could still move the laser off the target, if needed. We stressed that it was the job of every aircrew to 'own' its weapon and to make sure that it went where it was intended to go.

We had the youngest and least experienced flying aircrew in the air wing. One third of them had never been on any deployment, let alone seen combat. Only two of 30 aviators in my Ready Room had actually been in combat. I decided from day one that there

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would not be an A or B team; everyone would fly equally. About a week into combat operations, we were ordered to attack a large bridge that served as a transit route for Serbian tanks. After returning from a commanders' conference at Aviano Air Base, a NATO base in Italy, with senior flag and general officers, we received guidance that we needed to attack more 'communications lines' targets to change the dynamic on the ground. This necessitated daytime missions.

On 11 April, I was tasked to lead an attack of a major bridge over the Ibar, also known as the Ibri River, located in southeast Kosovo. This was the first attack on a bridge for the navy. We did all the weaponeering, map study and planning ourselves. There was limited air defense around the target, so we did not expect to be heavily opposed. Serb tanks were using the bridge routinely, and the goal was to inhibit their free movement.

Prior to the briefing, it occurred to me that it was a significant holiday in Kosovo. I asked my intelligence analysts what were the implications of our mission on Orthodox Easter Sunday. The analysts were aware of the holiday, but they were convinced that it was not of significance and should not prevent the execution of the mission.

When we took off, I thought it would be a relatively routine mission compared to the more pinpoint targets that we had been tasked with executing earlier in the campaign. Initially there was significant cloud cover, but as we approached the target area the clouds began to clear.

We planned our attack to swing north of the target and then come south. As we got closer, visibility improved but it was still not optimal. We dropped to minimum altitude for our approach. About 15 miles away from the bridge, the clouds finally broke and I could see the bridge on my targeting pod. We had four Tomcats and four Hornets in our formation, all carrying 2,000-pound bombs necessary to drop a large bridge. We had multiple support airplanes behind us.

We carefully planned the attack so that all the bombs would arrive simultaneously on target. This was not an unusual tactic but required precision formation flying and discipline with release parameters. As the lead with the LANTIRN pod, I was able to see the bridge as soon as the cloud cover broke and noticed no movement. As we closed in on the target at near supersonic speed, I was able to discern that the reason I had not seen movement on the bridge was not, as I had hoped, that the bridge was empty of traffic. Quite the opposite. There was a traffic jam on the bridge with hundreds of cars stacked bumper to bumper.

We were maintaining radio silence during the attack, and each aircraft had a preplanned release point for its weapons. With only seconds before the release point, realizing that the bridge was full of cars, I broke radio silence and transmitted the abort code order.

There was no radio acknowledgement from anyone in the flight, but everyone aborted without dropping a single weapon. We were so close to the release point that I was certain that somebody had dropped, but amazingly, not one pilot 'pickled a weapon'. Nobody questioned it. Up to this point in the conflict, we had not experienced this situation. My action matrix, with a decision to abort in those final critical seconds, was probably part of the nagging concern that I had already felt about Orthodox Easter Sunday and of course the immediate realization that if we took this bridge out with all these cars and people… well, clearly this would have been a nightmare – ethically, politically and strategically.

I knew it was the right thing to do. I chose not to discuss the details of the abort with the command center over the radio. They did ask why we had aborted, and rather than try to explain it over the radio, I gave them the code words for a weather abort since that had been a common reason for an abort up to this point in the operation.

When I landed, Rear Admiral Winston Copeland, our Carrier Strike Group Commander, who was a highly decorated veteran, was waiting for me. I said: 'Admiral, let's just watch the video tape.' So we went into the Aircraft Carrier Intelligence Center (CVIC), and after he saw what I had seen in my cockpit, he said: 'OK, I got it.' He took care of the phone calls. I really did not hear much more about it, good or bad.

Unfortunately, the next day, on 12 April 1999, a civilian casualty event occurred in Grdelica, a village in Serbia. A laser-guided weapon hit a train trestle while a passenger train was crossing and 14 people were killed. My admiral called me down to his office later that night and said: 'I can only imagine what the impact would have been if we'd taken out that bridge yesterday.'

The critical theme is that every aircrew must 'own its weapon'. It is a lesson we learned in Kosovo, and one we have quite honestly struggled with during Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan. During those 55 days of combat in Kosovo, I spent a lot of time with my aviators teaching them the importance of their own thinking in the air, always considering how to minimize civilian casualties. I wanted them to understand the full context and complexity of every mission. We spent hours reviewing our own videotapes from each day's missions. We highlighted our mistakes no matter how minor, rather than our successes, and our unfiltered honesty with no ego in the Ready Room quickly transitioned my inexperienced fighter pilots into combat-seasoned veterans making sound, ethical combat decisions in the air, resulting in no civilian casualties from our squadron of F-14 Tomcats.

Having served 32 years in our navy, I am often asked to talk about combat operations. When I reflect on my life lessons, I often discuss the details of this one particular 'bridge' mission in Kosovo. I do not talk too much about targets that I or my fellow aviators successfully destroyed, but I do often reflect on this mission as one of my personal life-changing moments and how its positive impact influenced an entire squadron. I continue to think about its significance to this day.

Walter E. Carter, Jr
Rear Admiral of the United States Navy
President of the US Naval War College
Address for correspondence: martin.l.cook@usnwc.edu