

TENDING TO AFFAIRS

After several years of preparing myself to command a B-52 bomber crew, I thought I had studied all the required aspects: the aircraft, the other aircraft commanders, the command, and the mission. And things had gone well. My novice crew had dropped the “best bombs” on our first Operational Readiness Inspection (ORI), trumping a dozen more experienced crews.

However, just when you think you are gaining mastery of your task, fate can put a MiG on your tail and threaten to blow you out of the sky.

Social relationships are a difficult aspect of military life on somewhat isolated bases. In far northern Maine, few twenty-something females were

PROLOGUE

available for several dozen young, single pilots to chase. This meant the most compatible females they would meet would be the wives of their coworkers.

Concurrently, some of the married folk, two to three years beyond the marriage ceremony, had discovered they had made a mistake in love and were trying to assess their prospects. This could make for a toxic social brew.

One day, my copilot's wife called. This was not unusual; my subordinate crewmembers' wives often spoke with me to arrange social gatherings. Had I been married, they'd have spoken with my wife, but I wasn't, so they spoke with me—except the copilot's wife wasn't speaking about anything specific; she was chit-chatting. I sensed she was going to tell me something I wasn't going to like, and, as she continued, I began to worry about what that might be. Was her husband beating her? Did he leave her? Was he drunk in a ditch? Where was she going with this?

Finally, after a pause, she unloaded it on me. She said the navigator's wife was interested in having an affair with me.

I'd prepared for many things, but not for this. I had been clueless that "nav wife" had any such interest. Although she was attractive, the potential for such a tryst had never crossed my mind.

This threatened the worst kind of trouble, trouble that could destroy a crew, end a career, or get a person shot. Aside from displaying dubious morality if I agreed to this, I would be guilty not only of abetting adultery, but of fraternizing with the wife of a subordinate. If discovered, it could easily be construed that I had used my position as her husband's direct supervisor to force myself on her. Even that would not address the betrayal of a friend and fellow bonded member of my crew.

I swallowed hard and asked if the navigator's wife had lost her mind. I insisted this must be a poor joke and to please tell me it was not true. The copilot's wife insisted it was true, but demurred that she was merely the messenger (this, in itself, seemed bizarre).

FLYING THE LINE, AN AIR FORCE PILOT'S JOURNEY

The next call, a few days later, came from nav wife herself. She asked if she could come to my house to discuss something. My decision to manage this seemed sound—get her one-on-one, shame her, chastise her, berate her, and get her straight. However, the venue she had suggested, that I ill-advisedly agreed to, was my place.

When she arrived, I sat her at one end of my dining room table while I sat at the other end with a good six feet of table between us. Distressingly for my task, however, she wore a thin, form-fitting sweater that accentuated her figure.

She asked if I knew why she was there, and I said I most certainly did. And with that, I launched into my concise, cogent, logical treatise of why this could not—and would not—happen, that such a liaison would threaten the crew and my career and would be a brazen betrayal of her husband, my friend and crewmate. I expected her to hang her head, feel ashamed, and apologize profusely when I finished upbraiding her.

Midway through my diatribe, however, I saw things were not going well. Nav wife measured me with the eyes of a poker player who knew she had the winning hand. My blistering, telling arguments appeared to have no effect. She seemed to already know all I would say, and it seemed not to matter. I ended by righteously avowing I would not betray her husband, and I was aghast she would do so in such a manner.

She paused a moment, looking down at the table for dramatic effect, then raised her sparkling eyes to mine with the faint smile of the cat about to swallow the canary, which told me a coup de grace was coming.

“You don’t have to worry about betraying my husband,” she said. “He knows I’m here. He sent me.”