

REFLECTIONS ON DHARMA AND COMBAT

BY MARK J. WILLIAMS

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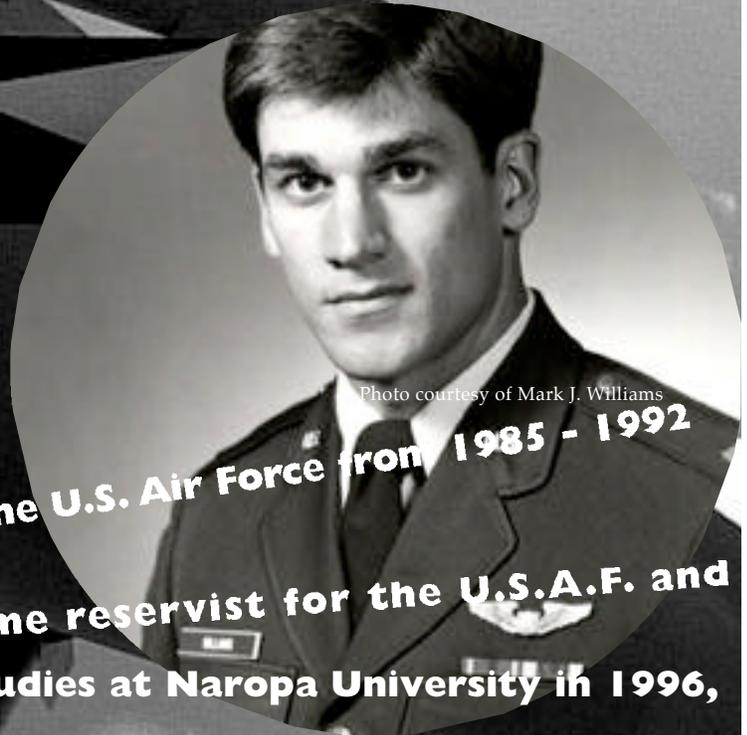


Photo courtesy of Mark J. Williams

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AERIAL COMBAT TRAINING

Ten years ago, I trained and served with an elite group of warriors. I flew the F-15C during the Gulf War with the 58th Tactical Fighter Squadron, the most decorated air-to-air combat unit of the war. We had 16 shootdowns, half the kills of the war. I participated in a number of these.

I no longer fly jets, but I can't shake the warrior's take on training.

VIEW

I was a "poster-child" for the fighter pilot life – attitude, intensity, and aggression – and I loved it. For a Type A bachelor kind-of-pilot-guy like me, life didn't get any better. At 24, I'd been selected to fly the F-15C, the premier air-to-air fighter in the world, and I intended to make good on this. All of life fell under the rubric of discipline and practice. I devoted my life to cultivating the skills of a first class fighter jock. Body, speech and mind were completely dedicated to mastery. I stayed in shape so I could pull more G's; I spent hours at the temple – the bar – studying and debating tactics and techniques to improve my knowledge; in my spare moments, I visualized combat scenarios in my mind's eye, meditating on the possibilities, move by move. I would fly anywhere, anytime, with anyone, practicing like my hair was on fire. After all, death was the business at hand.

My goal was to join mind, body and jet into a seamless union that would operate flawlessly in the heat of battle. With single-minded determination I pursued the Holy Grail of combat flying, situational awareness, or SA. SA is the panoramic view that correctly discerns the composition of a hyperdynamic battlespace. Only practice cultivates SA, and the practice usually found me roaring through space, closing on adversaries at Mach 2 with three other jets, radars sweeping, trying to paint a picture of friendlies and "bandits."

At 80 miles separation, it's two minutes from firing range and four minutes from passing "beak to beak."

Radios paint the changing canvas of planes in motion through space. The cadence is clipped, each player contributing information to describe the evolving picture. "Pennzoil 21, bandits bull's-eye, 320 for 40, three groups, possible champagne, engaged." Consciously processing all the information is impossible. The information pours in like the ticker-tape of stock quotes on a busy trading day. Everything you see and hear – from radio calls to radar and heads up display (HUD) information – describes a piece of the four dimensional puzzle that is the battlefield at that instant. Chaos and unpredictability reign in all ten

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directions, pitching the intensity. Only two things remain constant: change and the need for a relaxed and receptive mind.

When mind is unclouded and flowing with the engagement, SA blossoms. Thinking or conceptualizing detains the mind and freezes the frame, losing the view. Situational awareness "sees" without stopping. SA demands an intuitive seeing in the mind's eye, like the inkblot that suddenly morphs into a young woman. It rests in the dynamic experience of the battlespace itself and unfolds as the information flows. With SA I know the composition of space, the movement of enemy fighters and their relation to friendlies, who has the advantage or disadvantage, and most importantly,

whether or not to strike. Lacking SA, the thousand arms of Avalokiteshvara clash in discord and fail to strike the enemy. With SA, the swords strike a thousand targets without pause, in unison, precisely.

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Molding body to machine is a lot like learning to walk and run; first you take the jet out and see what she feels like in climbs, dives, turns and so forth, getting a sense of the operational envelope. After these safe and innocuous baby steps, you launch as a two-ship and begin training in the stick and throttle skills of Basic Fighter Maneuvers, or BFM. Now you're taking this new-found body and discovering what it does in a dogfight. It's a wild ride when two fighters "merge" head-on in space at over 1400 mph! As you pass close aboard, it's full burners and maximum G to maneuver to the bandit's vulnerable six o'clock position. He's doing the same and the result is a twisting, weaving, and gut-wrenching dance as planes flip-flop through the sky. With practice, you learn there's a single referent in three dimensional maneuvering, the other. Up, down, left, right, none of that matters when space is your playground.

Next you learn how to hear and see in this 50,000 pound body the size of a tennis court. Your ears are enhanced by radios, your eyes by radar. With the two, you learn to paint the composition of space in your mind's eye. Radios communicate what others are seeing. You practice the discipline of

radio transmission to ensure the orderly flow of information. Radars are your electronic eyes into space, how your missiles “see” when they come off the rails. You practice “playing the piccolo,” the art of moving the myriad switches on the stick and throttle to control the radar and its deadly messengers. Everything you need for acquiring, locking and killing bandits is literally at your fingertips. In time, moving the 20 switches in correct order and combination becomes second nature and you shift your “gaze” and aim your missiles at will. Now your eyes and ears orient you in space to find the fight. Ideally, missiles are off the jet by 20 miles; if not, you dogfight and apply the coup de grace.

Wrapping all this practice into one package means no lolly-gagging in training. Operating a \$25 million jet and blowing 3000 gallons of fossilized dinosaurs out the ass end of the airplane is an expensive proposition. You cannot waste time. In a one-hour training sortie you get 15 or 20 minutes of simulated combat. To that end, briefings and debriefings are indispensable. First you brief tactics. After the flight, you debrief and analyze their effectiveness and your execution. It’s a detailed process, often excruciatingly so. A 1 vs. 1 engagement lasting less than five minutes can take over two hours to debrief! A film recording your HUD and radar displays captures how you’re playing the piccolo and what you see out front. Frame by frame, every stick, throttle, and switch movement is reviewed to scrutinize and dissect radar and BFM skills. Radio calls are replayed for precision and timeliness. Mistakes are rigorously examined. When it’s all said and done, eight hours may pass debriefing an hour-long hop.

Although it felt like it sometimes, flagellation was not the point. Debriefs identify pernicious habits while cultivating the deliberate habit patterns of air-to-air combat. From this awareness, a new way of being – of doing and thinking – emerges. Slowly but surely, the mind is freed from the

mechanics of flying to focus on seeing and hearing. Then, as this concentration is practiced and mastered, technique is transcended and the mind begins relaxing – the panorama of situational awareness expands. After a year flying the F-15, I am comfortable in the jet, ready for combat. Faith and trust in my own abilities leads to a deep self-confidence. I welcome the unpredictability of large-force employment exercises (over 40 jets together in one piece of sky!) as a test of my practice and SA. Next thing I know, Saddam invades Kuwait and I’m off to Saudi liberating oilfields, testing for real.

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ACTION

We step to the jets early. It is, after all, the first mission of the war. The briefing was unusually long, lasting three hours rather than the usual two, so I’m already tired. It also doesn’t help that we’re launching at 0100 to be over Iraq by 0300. I go about my usual business in the helmet room, my ritual. I pull everything out of my wallet, save my only claim to Geneva Convention protections, my military I.D. Then I pull my patches, check the alarm on my watch (wouldn’t want it going off in the middle of the Iraqi desert if I was shot down and evading Iraqi troops...), and lift my helmet off the rack. A quick check of the mask. Mission info on my kneeboard, then throw the helmet, survival vest, 9mm Glock, and water bottle into the hel-

met bag for the trip out to the jets. A long six-minute van ride with three buddies out to a blackened flight line. Our weapons await in the cool Saudi night, loaded with 940 rounds of high explosive cannon fire, four heat-seeking sidewinder missiles, and four long-range radar guided missiles.

I slide into the cockpit to crank engines and program onboard systems. No time for thinking what the mission means. Butterflies disappear. I go about my preflight with absolute focus. Check-in time: “Pennzoil check. Two, three, four.” Showtime. On to the runway, then off, one by one, after-burners cooking. Nothing on my mind other than the task at hand – flying formation with three other airplanes to a refueling track south of Iraq. Never mind that the largest air armada ever assembled is airborne over these very skies. Never mind that we’ll be facing the stiffest air defenses since Berlin. And never mind that none of us has ever been in combat.

We cross the border and switch to “strike” frequency. A cacophony of voices explodes over the air. A curtain of orange, red and white anti-aircraft tracers is a backdrop to a Baghdad under fire. The worst possible scenario is unfolding – enemy fighters mixed with and engaging friendly forces. Radio discipline among our comrades evaporates as chaos erupts. Our cadence remains steady as we discern the picture amidst the mayhem. We hold our fire, trying to sort bandits from friendlies. Finally, a bandit reveals himself by firing at me. My flight lead returns fire. A sparkling flash in the night sky and we know his missile hit the mark. With technique and training transcended, SA blossoms and correct action is attained. Fruition of the training, fruition of the view.

FROM ORDINARY TO EXTRAORDINARY

Ordinary people focus outwardly; warriors train inwardly, making their inner world the project and the outer world the by-product. The warrior

real-izes that struggling against the circumstances of life is useless – the battlefield will present what it may. Rather than aiming to change their life, the warrior trains to change his or her mind – relaxing and opening to accept and move with what is. Once the dogfighting skills were there, this is what the F-15 was all about: operating without expectations or control in a three dimensional realm ruled by chaos, impermanence and death.

Of course nobody saw it like that. As products of a culture mostly blind to interior training, we never moved past the concept of situational awareness to talk about the underlying foundation, awareness itself. Though the training was mind training, no one recognized it for what it was. We lacked the deeper view to support this process. Like two-year olds with a set of keys, we never realized they could be more than just teething rings or rattles. Unable to distinguish process from content, the lessons we learned so well never made it past the jet into ordinary life.

Mind training is mind training, no matter where performed. The process is the same, regardless of content. After the Air Force, I trained in the mushin no shin or “mind-no-mind” of the Aikido practitioner. The minutes of battle in aerial combat were reduced to the moments of an attacker’s onrush, with the same need for relaxation and receptivity, the same need for SA. As sensei said, “Always ‘Yes!’, never ‘No.’” Each attack had to be welcomed. Any hint of resistance – any hope or expectation that the attack could or would be different – meant certain failure. That mind is

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becoming clearer and clearer.

Soon thereafter, I connected my martial path with Buddhist meditation and saw how the meditative path refined the measure of openness and receptivity yet again. Now the battle for a clear mind free of expectations is reduced to a single moment, trained in over a lifetime. This view of training embraces process regardless of content. It is the most profound: cultivating the guts that cries “yes!” to everything, always.

DHARMA TRAINING GROUND

What converts the ordinary meditation of the fighter pilot into the extraordinary meditation of a practi-

tion-er? View. View moves our meditation practice from a nifty

human trick to a path for awakening. Without renunciation and the aspiration of bodhichitta, the awakened heart of compassion, mind training is just another method of mastering the mundane.

The spiritual warrior trains in view and meditation. When the view guides living, every aspect of life is ground for training. Combating unconscious habits of resistance and control means learning and practicing the habit patterns of meditation. This mindfulness wakes us to every frame of experience, like a fighter pilot’s HUD/Radar tape. The truth of suffering is that no defense can accommodate the offense of existence. Connection, openness and knowingness – situational awareness – only come when we quit posturing and relax the habit of struggle. Practicing to look inside, we learn about the

mind; training the mind, we cultivate the heart of SA, awareness itself.

PATH

How do actions change with view and practice? After a ten-year hiatus, I go back to the future, returning to fly jets as a fighter-trainer instructor for the upcoming generation of fighter jocks. Putting on the flight suit is a shock; I am slipping on old clothes, a uniform I never expected to wear again. Groundlessness. Emotions cascade through me and a cast of characters step forward to give them shape. Confident, scared, confused. I flicker in and out of each at breathtaking speed. I am all of them. They are the sum of my parts, the Madhyamaka indeed.

It's the first day of class. "Memorize these," they say as they hand me a stack of books over a foot high. On top is a book cataloguing all the accidents of the T-38 over the years; I sit down on my apartment couch and begin reading. Pictures and narratives tell the gruesome stories of accidental death. The knot in my gut grows. I look out into space, my mind collapsing with accelerating thoughts. "What the hell was I thinking? They should know better than to recruit a guy ten years out of the cockpit." In seconds I'm immobilized, poured into a cast, Hans Solo style. Twenty minutes pass. A flickering of awareness, "Wake up." Then I vapor lock again. Finally, I throw a lifeline and grab my breath. Blessed be the body and the cushion of practice. I begin counting, slowly, deliberately, tasting the intensity. Nice to know that practice is practice. In armed conflict, training takes over when the missiles start flying. So too in ego's battle. A new kind of training kicks in as I breathe out and taste the spaciousness of an instant. My blind faith in samsaric habits is disturbed. In that moment, a new possibility takes shape.

I commit to practice no matter how busy, no matter how crazy; renounce my mundane, goal-oriented focus and switch my allegiance to a practitioner's view – seeing the process as path.

After all, if I can't find the path to enlightenment there – here – where will I find it? My mind is more than a wild horse on the loose; it's a stampede of buffalo on the run. No fancy practice here, just the most basic counting of the breath. I can barely hear above the roar, barely see above the dust. On the out breath, a gap, a glimpse of sanity. My reference is the non-reference of that stillness and space. The same gap as always, but the contrast with a mind in stampede makes it more apparent still. Touch the nature for just an instant and then the stampede, again and again. The contrast, unbelievable.

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nothing goes away, nothing changes. Learning to fly has always been an anxious proposition for me. This time around is no different, maybe worse because it's been ten years. I get seven hops and then I'm off to a "checkride," a final exam of sorts. The pressure is definitely on. Not only that, but for the first time in my life, I'm consciously concerned about dying. When I was a single guy flying F-15's, I approached the issue glibly – I die, my mom and siblings grieve some, everybody moves on. Now, with a wife, daughter, and dharma training, things have changed.

Every time I step to fly it's like I've been punched in the gut. Usually I notice the tension as I take my pre-flight leak: a gaping hole of anxiety right in the solar plexus. In the old

days, I'd just dismiss it. Now I practice noticing, simply observing the anxiety and its concomitant cast of characters, "This must mean something. I shouldn't fly today. I don't need this in my life. F— this." On and on, round and round, until I finally get to the jet. When I slide my parachute into the cockpit, the old training kicks in. My mind narrows to the task at hand and the tension subsides like surf returning to the ocean. Mind and body join as I strap on the jet, crank engines, and launch. An hour later, I land and shut down. Disjoined from the airplane, thoughts re-crank, and I am back.

Every two weeks I fly home to Hap and Ava. The high of homecoming followed by the loneliness of return is a brutal cooker. Locked in the intermediate state between family and flying, I return to the airbase off-balance and discom-bobulated, my heart ripped open, habitual thoughts set in motion yet again. After the tears though, comes an open heart resting in stillness, nothing more. Here I glimpse the warrior's courage, at rest with what is. My faith and trust in the unfolding is absolute. Finally, a deep confidence in the unconventional view and methods of the practice strengthens my resolve to leap nakedly into the unknown.

FRUITION

One day, the training clicks. The stampede fades and I land in a disconcerting spaciousness and stillness. Until now, for all my suffering, I couldn't abandon the struggle. Anxiety is familiar, a reassuring sense that I'm existing and alive. When it leaves, I disappear. All those mental gyrations, they're all about ego and its agenda of selfhood. But dropping these is tremendously uncomfortable. I am dying on the spot. Who am I if not that whirling concatenation of confusion and terror? And who is scared of dying but that very same I? A taste of the view in a moment's fruition.

After passing the first checkride, my "hands" are back. The second half of

the program is a breeze. But a gut feeling – SA – tells me my interest in the military is coming to a close. I enrolled to fly T-38's but my commitment is ultimately to the process, not the content. From here, different decisions are made. A month short of finishing, I S.I.E. – "Self Induced Elimination." Ignominious in tone and meaning, I lose my place in the brotherhood. I choose home and family over the thrill of an afterburner. The day I quit, I know there's nothing more to learn from a jet.

View is the final distinction between ordinary and extraordinary warriors. A fighter pilot's practice starts and finishes with his jet; spiritual practice comes in the experiences of everyday life. Training hard means taking samsara as path and asking, "How does this inform awakening?" Awareness is cultivated in ordinary living. This doesn't denigrate the circumstances of existence – I busted my butt every day of flight training because awareness demands impeccable integrity. Rather, it challenges our commitment and courage to practice openness and awareness within all our relationships. This is what the training is all about.

