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‘Nightmare Fuel’: Friendly-Fire Incidents Over the Red Sea Make for the Navy’s Worst —and Luckiest — Day

A destroyer shoots down a Navy fighter jet seconds before it was due to land on its home aircraft carrier, and a second jet barely escapes a similar fate.

By Steve Cohen

The United States Navy experienced one of its worst nightmares the other day: one of its guided missile cruisers, the United States Ship *Gettysburg*, shot down a Navy fighter Upgrade jet just minutes before it was to land on its home aircraft carrier, the United States Ship *Harry Truman*.

It was also the Navy’s luckiest day: both the pilot and his back-seat weapons officer safely ejected just seconds before the SAM-2 missile completely destroyed the F-18 jet. And then, just seconds later, a second missile from the *Gettysburg* missed another F-18 by just 100 feet.

Friendly-fire “Blue-on-Blue” accidents are, as a former Navy aviator, [Commander Ward Carroll](#), said, “Nightmare fuel.”

Exactly what happened in the wee hours of the morning on December 22 is not yet clear. And undoubtedly all of what transpired will never be made public since operational security — and vulnerabilities — are highly classified.

A highly probable picture of what happened, though, is being pieced together by Commander Carroll, who flew F-14’s for 15 years after his graduation from the Naval Academy and was named the Naval Institute Press Author of the Year and hosts a highly respected [YouTube channel](#) on military affairs.

The *Harry Truman* and its strike group was operating in the Red Sea, and had just completed night operations against Houthi rebels. The Houthis had fired 8 drones and 17 ballistic and cruise missiles at the strike group, which included the nuclear carrier *Harry Truman*, the *Gettysburg*, two Arleigh Burke-class guided missile destroyers, and an air wing including about 70 airplanes.

“The strike package — probably about 24 aircraft — had returned to the carrier,” explained Commander Carroll. “But three F-18s, which were configured as tankers for mid-air refueling of the fighters, still had to land. There’s bad weather and it is night-time. Plus, I’m imagining there were still some bad-guy assets somewhere in the vicinity that could threaten our ships and planes. It is a high entropy environment.”

Commander Carroll explained that in this challenging environment, the landing procedure looks a bit like planes stacked up to land at LaGuardia airport: in line with about five miles separating each aircraft. “The *Truman* is traveling at about 20 knots, and the *Gettysburg* is about 10 miles directly behind the carrier on plane guard duty — to recover the pilots in case there is an accident.”

The *Gettysburg*, Commander Carroll added, was also “Alpha Whiskey,” the ship in charge of air defense for the entire strike group. “The planes are flying at 250 knots and a 1,200-foot altitude,” he said. “So, the first plane informally designated Ripper 1, is five miles behind the *Gettysburg*; and the second plane,

Ripper 2 is five miles behind Ripper 1. They have turned off their tactical radar, turned off their defensive measures such as chaff and flares, and removed their night vision goggles.”

The jets “have their tail hooks down but are not yet ‘dirty’ – their landing gear and flaps are still up. It is important to remember that at this speed and altitude, they have very little maneuverability,” explained Carroll.

“Suddenly, the two Ripper 1 aviators see a plume of flame from the base of a surface to air missile being launched from the *Gettysburg*, directly in front of them. And they realize the missile is headed towards them. They have seconds — not minutes — before the missile hits them. Their training has taught them to try to evade the missile, save the aircraft. But with little speed, low altitude, and no defensive measures, they decide to eject. Time elapsed: approximately three seconds. And about 10 seconds later, the SAM-2 hits the aircraft, completely destroying it.”

In the meantime, Ripper 2 is just five miles back and closing quickly. In less than a minute after the first SAM was launched, he realizes the *Gettysburg* has fired a second missile — at them. The pilot performs a desperate maneuver, and feels the missile whoosh past him. He hears the thump and crash of the missile into the sea and sees the explosion. Whether it was brilliant or lucky piloting — or an abort order had been sent out by the *Gettysburg* — we don’t know yet.

What we do know is that the *Gettysburg* — still on station is a very hot battle space — has been relieved of “Alpha Whiskey” responsibilities. One of the other “small boys” — the 500-foot, 9,000-ton destroyers — has been given the responsibility. Several careers are certainly over. And Central Command, in the fog of war, put out an initial message erroneously blaming the shootdown of Ripper 1 on a Houthi missile.

Most of all, though, we know that we were lucky to lose just one aircraft — and no lives — at 3 A.M. on December 22. General Dwight Eisenhower said, “I’d rather have a lucky general than a smart general. They win battles.” The Navy needs to be lucky and good.

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