

# Beware, the Sleep Monster Cometh

by LCdr. Scott Shappell and Lt. Douglas Wiegmann

**W**e own the night” is not just a slogan. Flying at night is a fact of life for many of our aviation communities, complicated by long work schedules, poor weather and high workloads. As such, we will continue to fly well into the night and early morning hours, a time when our bodies would much rather be sleeping. What can you do to hold off the sleep monster? We offer four silver bullets.


First, knowledge is power, and in this case may even save your life. You must be aware of those times when the pressure to sleep is great, your attention is waning, and your performance is at risk. A solid understanding of circadian rhythms is mandatory for a night fighter. It should come as no surprise that alertness and performance are worst at night. We must take extra precautions when briefing and manning flights during the so-called circadian trough.

For example, several risk-management items should be briefed with any night mission. Did everyone get enough rest last night? Are you mentally alert? Aircrews should also be reminded of the insidious threat of sleepiness and the dangers associated with inattention and the lack of alertness.

The second silver bullet is caffeine. Many of us use caffeine, and most, if not all, of us are addicted, drinking several cups of coffee or cans of soda throughout the day. As a result, it takes large doses of caffeine to obtain the pick-me-up required late at night. The end result is stomach problems, the shakes, or worse yet, the untimely urge to empty your bladder several times in flight – a difficult proposition in many aircraft.

Therefore, if you know that you will be flying a night mission in the future and you intend to use caffeine as a stimulant, you must wean yourself from it the week before by drinking decaffeinated drinks. Only then will you get the maximum stimulant bang for the minimal buck, thereby reducing those nasty side effects, most importantly a full piddle-pack.

The third silver bullet is strategic napping. In the May-June 1996 issue of *Approach Mech*, we described this strategic napping, a vital technique for warding off sleepiness and fatigue associated with night flights. A 10-to-20-minute nap strategically placed before or after (not during) the preflight brief is gouge for the combat aviator. Longer naps of up to 1.5 hours may also prove useful in the late afternoon or early evening before a scheduled night mission.

The fourth silver bullet is increased cockpit communication. It is critical during night missions. As we all know, the effects of sleep and fatigue are worsened when you are alone. Furthermore, when you do become tired and sleepy, and problems develop in the cockpit, telling your crew and others in the flight of your condition will enlist their help. 

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