

The Tailhook That Couldn't

Joining up on the tanker through scattered layers was the least of

By Lt. Charles Schwarze

Any pilot who's flown in support of Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) in the winter months knows weather in Afghanistan can be frustrating, routine tasks can turn treacherous, and fuel ladders can change by the minute. Then, five hours after takeoff, when you're over the Arabian Sea, the most dangerous and difficult part of the mission is about to occur: landing back on the boat.

Four months into a routine eight-month deployment, our air wing had started round three of OEF, after some changes of scenery to include Iraq, the Horn of Africa, and a holiday port call in Dubai. I was lead for a section of Rhinos going north to support new JTACs (joint terminal attack controllers) in-country; my skipper was flying wing. Going into the brief, I knew the weather over Afghanistan was terrible, and our brief confirmed that fact. You could expect tankers to look for clear air and jets to experience icing conditions on the transit.

I focused on the basics during the brief, which included safe tanker join-up and tac-admin specifics, anchoring on JDAM (joint direct attack munition), in case we had to employ them through the weather. We allowed time to load mission cards and to get the body ready for the six-hour mission. I walked, confident I could get my jet to Afghanistan, back to the boat, and safely aboard at night. After all, we'd been doing this for four months. What could go wrong?

The launch and transit north were uneventful and long, as usual. We joined our first tanker an hour before sunset, with some minor theatrics, in the

weather at 27,000 feet, and about 50 miles north of Kandahar. It was good to see a KC-10. My skipper and I each took 13,000 pounds of gas. The weather continued to deteriorate as we fueled. Most of the tanker tracks were becoming unworkable because of poor weather, and sunset was approaching. My skipper made the call to send our air-wing assets back to the ship.

Knowing our next two scheduled tankers were KC-135s, I didn't say a word as I pointed the flight back south

toward the boat. We had enough gas to make the scheduled recovery and even had some extra help as a KC-135 stood by for us as we departed Pakistan for the North Ara-



bian Sea. We took a few thousand pounds extra and entered the marshal stack.

For those of you who haven't given up on this flight (and article) getting interesting, here we go. I pushed out of marshal with no issues and started the CV-1 approach to the ship. My first pass had that familiar cadence as Paddles gave their infamous, "Little right for lineup... easy with it... bolter... bolter... bolter!"

I cursed under my breath, raised my landing gear, and turned left for another try. I told Paddles I'd be

I turned downwind, this time picturing my squadronmates in the ready room "rigging for red" and taking bets on whether I'd complete the over-under by tagging the ace the next time down. The Air Boss broke up my thoughts during the crosswind turn by saying, "103, check your hook down."

I wanted to retort with, "No sir, I was just getting a few touch-and-goes," but restrained myself. I instead told him the hook handle indeed was down, with no transition light.

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tank state plus two passes on my next landing attempt. I rode the ACLS down and flew a solid pass on my second attempt but again found myself flying. This time, it took Paddles a few seconds before coming on the radio with a "hook skip" call to ease my pain. I could hear uncertainty in his voice, which made me a bit uneasy about what just had taken place.

He followed with, "Roger that 103, we didn't see any sparks on that last bolter." My mind started racing.

Like any other carrier aviator, one of my favorite things to do at night is watch "scary TV," better known as the ship's plat camera, and make fun of pilots boltering at night by yelling ironic quips to the TV, like "See ya later, sparky" or "I guess he just wanted to get more flight time."



Photo by MCSN Travis S. Alston. Modified.

We also know how horrible it is to be the guy who drags his hook past those wires and has to fly another night approach. Unfortunately, my hook didn't spark that second time, and I had no idea why not. Was it broken? Was it not fully extending? I didn't know the answers, and I had no way of knowing because I couldn't take a look at it.

My next problem after that second bolter was gas. I determined I'd be tank plus a few hundred pounds after my next attempt. I could see my tanker take a hawk position at my right 5 o'clock as I started down on glideslope for the third time. Everything looked good as I rolled on the flight deck for what seemed like an eternity. Then I heard a "power back on" call. I was going flying yet again; my heart sunk. I cleaned up the jet and took a radar lock on the tanker at my 1 o'clock.

Joining up on the tanker through scattered layers was the least of my concerns; all I could think about was how I would land my jet. I knew Seeb International airport in Oman was roughly 200 miles away, and I had a sneaking suspicion no matter how well I flew any subsequent passes at the boat, something on my jet wasn't going to allow me to catch any of those wires.

I tried to do the mental math and got the call to switch to my squadron rep on button 18. I got settled in the basket and shut up departure by calling "plugged and receiving."

My rep advised me to take 6,000 pounds, and I happily obeyed. I asked what they could see of my jet during the bolters. He said I may have hit something on the flight deck after my first bolter, and my hook looked like it wasn't fully extended on tries two and three. With that information and 9,000 pounds of gas to play with, my signal was divert. I was ready for a cold one.

I still had 2,000 pounds of ordnance on the jet, and my new wingman, the tanker, focused his FLIR on my jet to get some good cruise-video footage of my slicking off the jet. This also exposed my hook problem, which, at the time, I'm glad I had not known about. My hook was down but had rotated 60 degrees to the starboard side of the jet. We found out later that the turtleback (a metal shroud used to cover the catapult blade at the end of cat 3) had met with my hook at the end of my first bolter. The hook slammed into it and went up to the right, breaking the centering spring that holds the hook straight on the centerline of the aircraft. Each time I had cycled the hook, it had slammed into the lower starboard fuselage panel, leaving three separate holes in the fuselage. If a divert

wasn't available, there would be no way to stop the jet, other than a barricade.

I arrived at the bomb box, jettisoned my bombs, kissed off my wingman, and started a climb toward Seeb International. I was told to stay below FL230 en route to Oman and complied, knowing I'd be fat on gas. I climbed, set max range, and broke out my navbag to check out the approach plates for Seeb. Although our aircraft doesn't have the navigation suite to shoot the published approaches there, the SA gained by looking at the approaches and the airport diagram would be invaluable. Flipping through the pages, I found Santa Maria and Sevilla. Spain? That didn't sound right. I looked at the front of the approach plate and saw I had a European Volume Five, which would have been helpful in a divert to Egypt or the Azores. Unfortunately, I required a Volume Seven for Oman. Thankfully, I had an IFR supplement, a good waypoint for the airfield, good weather, and a controller I could understand.

I retracted the hook, checked my anti-skid and taxi light on, and landed on asphalt for the first time in five months. I taxied my hurt bird to the Royal Air Force detachment and hopped out to inspect the damage. I had three punctures to the skin of the aircraft and major damage to the hook-attachment point. I was grateful to the Brits, who were waiting with a cold one. The next day, our HS squadron brought out a four-man rescue detachment. After some quick work with speed tape and a new tailhook assembly, we were headed back to the ship.

The entire experience ended well but raised some major debriefing points. What if the weather in Seeb had been 200-1/2 when I got there? Air operations probably would have sent me to a field with a TACAN approach, but again, I didn't have the appropriate plates. Make sure you have the materials for the theater you're operating in, and you'll be covered for any contingency. I knew full well how to get to the divers in OEF and had the plates to get into Kandahar or Bagram, but those sites were 600 miles away when my emergency happened.

Fortunately, not all the holes in the Swiss cheese decided to align that night, and we didn't have to barricade the first Rhino. Not every emergency we have is a NATOPS quiz, but the unexpected can and will happen. If you have solid preparation, the right information, and a solid team to work with, you can get through almost anything. 

Lt. Schwarze flies with VFA-143.