



By Lt. Adam DeJesus

The Tigertails were controlling the airways in support of Operation Enduring Freedom on a bright, sunny day over Afghanistan. As the primary controller of the AEW South airspace, I provided flight-following and administrative services

# In Harm's

for Air Force and Navy assets headed into the coalition-operating area. The mission was long and tedious, and it was only half over, but my crew and I were in for real excitement.

We were proceeding south on the “driveway” when a track appeared on my scope. The track was an aircraft headed south, about 75 miles behind us. Using their squawk, I identified it as Reach, a C-17 cargo jet, undoubtedly ferrying implements of war to and from the front. Because the aircraft would be transiting the airspace under my control, I labeled it, noted its altitude, and continued my scan of the area. We only had been in theater a little over a week, but the routine already was second nature to everyone on board.

At first, I was not concerned when Reach began to overtake us. At 160 knots, flying a max-endurance profile, an E-2C is the airborne version of farm equipment riding the shoulder of the road. We were used to just about everything out there passing us. Reach also was co-altitude, which wasn’t surprising. The airspace over Pakistan is limited to a few specific altitude blocks, with lateral separation built in for traffic flying opposite directions. We were VFR, had an operating radar, and were in control of all aircraft within line of sight.

After half an hour of watching the C-17 close on us, I became concerned since he had not checked in with us. I made a few queries on the control frequency to

see if Reach had been switched to us but received no answer. At 20 miles of separation, the air control officer (ACO) told the pilot and copilot a co-altitude aircraft was overtaking us. “Roger,” came the reply. I continued to scan the airspace, expecting Reach to check in at any time.

Suddenly, it was apparent to all of us at the scopes we had a problem on our hands. A very large aircraft was closing on us from behind, at our altitude, and we weren’t controlling it. We had no way of knowing whether that crew could see us, or whether they would climb or descend to avoid us. With a little more inflection in my voice, I again called for Reach but got no answer. It now had closed to within seven miles, and I would lose track of it soon because of our minimum-detection range.

The ACO again called traffic to the pilots and recommended we climb to FL260 to avoid it. The CAPC responded, “Aren’t you talking to him?”

“No, we’re not,” replied the ACO, as I spit out a desperate call in the blind.

“Reach, Tigertail is on your nose, four miles, co-altitude, and climbing to avoid,” I called.

The radio panel lit up like a Christmas tree, as all of us began talking on other control nets to get the word to the C-17. Finally, I heard our pilot call on guard, “C-17 aircraft between points two and three on driveway two, this is Tigertail on guard, switch AEW South.”

I felt our aircraft attitude change as I watched the scope. Reach now was tracking directly below us. I won-

# Driveway

