

I Thought I Had It Nailed

By Lt. Brian Merritt

In-flight refueling (IFR) is an essential part of today's missions. If correctly done, it's a quick break from the action, and you've got a full bag ready to go. When the refueling doesn't go as planned, however, you can be in for a very bad day.

Such was the case in month one of Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) for my wingman and me. We had been in the gulf long enough to have the basics figured out, and as we pulled up to the KC-10 (sweet, right?), we figured it would be IFR as usual. I led us on the night tanker rendezvous, about 60 miles to the northeast of Al Asad. Everything was on track with a safe join-up and move to precontact.

All the standard comm was completed with the KC-10, and I acknowledged the "no more than three-knots-closure" request. The night was smooth, and the probe contacted the basket with, I thought, no problems. Instead, the contact was more like a Pinto being tapped by a runaway shopping cart; the rodeo that ensued quickly got my attention. The takeup reel in the KC-10 didn't absorb the shock of the probe contacting the basket, which caused a sine wave to go from the basket to the tanker and come back at my jet like a whip.

Once I saw the wave develop, I tried to get out of the basket, but idle/boards just wasn't enough. It's hard to guess just how fast it happened, but I'd say somewhere between "Wtf?" and damned fast.

This cruise was my second as a JO, so I had some reasonable experience, though OIF is a far cry from my first WestPac pleasure cruise with jets. The KC-10 retracted the hose, and I told my senior wingman the problem was fixed. No dice, Chicago, as I heard him call on the radio the same thing had happened to him; both of us were on our way to Al Asad.

Fortunately, we were close to that base, and we appropriately had padded our gas.

What did I learn from the first of two probes being ripped off? Know your bingo and stick to it, watch for takeup reel issues, and respect the KC-10.

The next time a probe came off the jet was a little more traumatic. About a month after my first trip to sunny Al Asad, I once again was pulling up to the KC-10 for a good deal (daytime) tank before the RTB. Did I mention you should respect the KC-10?

Here's a quick history lesson. The Rhino is notorious for not accepting centerline fuel during in-flight refueling. This problem is frustrating because there seems to be no rhyme or reason to when you'll get fuel or when you won't. On any given day, you can pull up to the tanker and get a full centerline, go do your vul, then return to the exact tanker and not get a drop. Without the 3,000 pounds in your centerline tank, you're fighting ladder for the vul you're working, which can be even more frustrating as you're trying to support the troops on the ground.

You can try a few voodoo fixes to get gas into the centerline: Put the tank switch to "stop" after the centerline is done transferring, drop the hook, cycle the centerline-transfer switch while in the basket, or rub a chicken claw on the probe. We have limited success with most of these fixes, but I'm guessing the chicken claw is about as helpful as anything.

I was in the KC-10 basket that day, and once again, I was not getting fuel into the centerline. This lack of fuel can be a bit problematic for the RTB leg when you factor in timing and how many people need to cycle through the tanker. So began my one-man-marching-band show to get fuel in the centerline.



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U.S. Air Force photo by Staff Sgt. Gaddis. Modified.

Oh, by the way, I'm still in the basket at this point, which was my first mistake. Your job while tanking isn't troubleshooting in the cockpit. If you need to work some switches, then come out of the basket, work the issues, and replug.

I also should mention this situation occurred at about our two-month point in OIF. By now, everything was standard, and KC-10 tanking usually was no problem. As I cycled my head up and down in the cockpit while moving the fuel switch, I slowly began to slide out of the basket. As I glanced up, I saw the KC-10 getting smaller and threw on a handful of power. At 26,000 feet, I didn't think this action would create the reaction it did. I saw a very familiar sine wave develop as the takeup reel couldn't quite absorb all the power. I was off to the races.

I decided to take the basket, and a chunk of hose completely came off. (Side note: If you take a basket with you and want to keep it, you'd better give the Air Force an airtight alibi for the basket's whereabouts.) The situation was worsened by the basket and hose slicing into the top of my right vertical stab, and the KC-10

fuel hose spraying gas down my No. 2 intake.

In about three seconds, I had ripped off the basket and hose, lost a good portion of the probe arm with it, damaged the vertical stab, heard "Engine right, engine right" cautions with momentary engine stalls, and breathed JP-5. Yes, it was a bad day, and this time, I didn't have a takeup reel to blame.

Having pieces of the jet fall off in flight never is good, and it's infinitely worse when pilot error is the cause. I was fortunate, once again, because I was close to Al Asad, and they had my usual quarters waiting for me. After the flight, I realized complacency is an insidious beast for all of us to fight. I thought I had OIF nailed and that nothing could happen in such a simple evolution as in-flight refueling with a KC-10. I was wrong; IFR can be dangerous.

No task is too simple for aviators. Always respect the jet and the dangerous nature of our job. If you think you've got it all figured out, think again. You just might find yourself walking around the Iraqi desert, and believe me, you'd much rather take IFR more seriously. 

Lt. Merritt flies with VFA-115.