



The Danger of Night Tanking

By Lt. Wayne D. Oetinger

Have you ever been to the Arabian Gulf on an Operation Southern Watch (OSW) mission and were worried about the AAA or SAM threat? How about finding your designated mean point of impact at 25,000 feet on the less-than-impressive Nighthawk FLIR? Maybe that pitch-black night trap at the end of a three-hour mission weighs heavily in your mind. These are all concerns the average strike-fighter pilot has to face, but I dare say the potential danger in the nighttime tanker rendezvous is equally significant.

Nighttime tanking on the KC-10 and KC-135 is a subject that hits close to home for all CVW-1 aircrew because of the midair during a heavy tanker rendezvous in the '97-'98 deployment to the Persian Gulf. Flying OSW missions nearly every day in the Gulf during



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that cruise, aircrew quickly realized just how challenging nighttime tanking could be. For almost every mission in Iraq, all strike-fighter and SEAD aircraft in the package were fragged for both pre- and post-mission gas from the KCs. To make it even more complicated, one or two of the heavy tankers on the event would become unavailable, which made things more dangerous. The pilots coming out of country with critical fuel states were looking for post-mission gas. Factor in 30 airplanes were trying to get their pre-mission fuel in time for their push, and you have a dangerous environment.

After learning the painful lesson from that cruise, things have improved significantly regarding tanking on the heavies. As an air wing, we do a much better job of briefing the basics of the tanker rendezvous: altitude, bearing and closure. We also limit the number of aircraft on the tanker at one time to five. Other aircraft now wait a mile in trail of the tanker. Even though that can confuse other aircrew rendezvousing on the heavy, it has reduced the number of near-misses. We deconflict our tanking plans better now and have a dedicated fallout plan for the strike fighters if a heavy tanker is suddenly unavailable. Finally, we've taken more of a stream-raid type approach to our fam strikes in Iraq

which allows individual elements to go into hostile territory once the container has been opened by the SEAD element. This has drastically reduced the amount of aircraft on the tanker at one time and has also reduced the likelihood of aircraft trying to get gas post-mission at a critical fuel state.

Now that we've implemented some air-wing safeguards for mission tanking, what can we do as individual aircrew? To begin with, flight leads need to keep a vigilant lookout for other aircraft while in the rendezvous, avoiding the temptation to join in STT while only looking through the TD box. Wingmen have to maintain a disciplined, mission cross-check time; flying safe, loose-cruise form on the flight lead is the wingman's main priority.

If wingmen have enough situational awareness to recognize when something unsafe develops, they need to speak up on the radio to back up their lead. Some wingmen may feel uncomfortable doing this, and some flight leads even might resent it, but the alternatives are much worse if you put them in perspective. In the debrief, simply go over the comms and decide if it was warranted or not. If it was, kudos to the wingman for the good heads-up in averting a potential mishap. If it wasn't necessary, learn from it, but don't admonish the wingman for having the courage to speak up.

The air wing is responsible for developing and employing safe, standardized tanking procedures while all aircrew must be disciplined in nighttime tanker rendezvous. As a flight lead, be wary when in the join-up and religiously follow those ABCs. As a wingman, fly good form, and don't hesitate to speak up on the radio, if necessary. Everyone involved in night tanking has to remember that it's one of the most dangerous parts of the mission.

Lt. Oetinger flies with VFA-86.

