

# Just Another Tanker

By *LCdr. Will Powers*

I will never forget night 16 of Operation Iraqi Freedom. No, I didn't perform some heroic feat, but it was the night I nearly flew my wingman and myself into an Air Force tanker.

I was scheduled to lead a section of Hornets on a night-interdiction mission into northern Iraq. It had been 22 nights since my last night flight, and the moon was supposed to be out (50-percent illumination). The weather brief brought more "good" news: The weather was forecast to be lousy, with multiple layers up to 30,000 feet, and hazy, with limited visibility. Fortunately, my wingman was an experienced and seasoned second-cruise JO.

The late-afternoon launch and rendezvous were uneventful. The first sign of things to come began with our transit through Turkey. The weather was lousy—just as forecast. My wingman and I had to climb and dodge all sorts of weather in the transit corridor to reach our tanker track in Iraq. Of the three tanker tracks, only two were workable. We found our tanker at dusk, topped off with fuel, and headed into Iraq.

We dropped our bombs on Iraqi positions, then headed back to the tanker track. It was dark, with the various cloud layers blocking out the moon. My wingman and I had donned NVGs, but the haze and broken layers severely limited their utility. The weather we had passed on our transit had moved into the tanker tracks, and now only one of the tracks was workable. Multiple tankers were working this track in weather that ranged from VFC to complete IMC. We had to sort through some confusion before we found our tanker.

The fun began during our rendezvous on the KC-10. In and out of the clouds, with no horizon, and dodging other aircraft became a handful. We had closed to within three miles of our tanker when I had a serious case of vertigo. I felt like I was in a right-hand, nose-low

spiral. I flipped up the NVGs and transitioned to a radar and HUD scan to beat the vertigo. We had closed to within a mile and a half of the tanker, but we were 500 feet high and acute as I battled with the leans. That's when the tanker completely went IFR. I tried to transition my scan to the radar, control closure, and finish the now IFR rendezvous—I failed miserably.

The next thing I saw was the tanker pop out of the clouds, and we were on an acute, constant-bearing, decreasing-range flight path. No problem, I just would under-run. As I sucked the throttles to idle and popped the speed brake, my situation got worse. I tried to lose altitude from our acute and high position, but all I did was to increase our already excessive closure. I recall seeing the windscreen full of KC-10 as I stuffed the stick forward as hard as I could. NVGs, smartpacks, kneeboard cards, and piddlepacks went everywhere as I braced for the impending collision.

I heard the roar of the KC-10's engines and then silence; I narrowly had avoided the collision. I glanced over my left shoulder, expecting to see the fireball of my wingman's collision, but, to my relief, he had avoided the KC-10 as well. He ended up slightly lower but closer to the tanker than I had been. As we stabilized outside the tanker, I realized I needed to quickly find that used piddlepack. I profusely apologized to my wingman as we crossed back under and joined on the tanker. We got our gas, cleaned up the mess in our cockpits, and enjoyed our night traps.

We had a chance to discuss the incident at mid-rats. As the safety officer, I had warned the squadron about the dangers of complacency, but I had ignored my warnings. During the previous three weeks, I had completed four daytime-tanker rendezvous during every flight. I had become used to carrying excess closure and positioning myself slightly acute to expedite the join-up.

# Rendezvous

During the daytime, this procedure was fine because most rendezvous were VFR and presented visual cues of when to slow the closure. The night of my incident, though, with bad weather, vertigo, and IFR conditions, I had carried far too much closure, too close to be safe or controllable.

I had become a victim of the dreaded “I can hack it” syndrome. When I lost sight of the tanker, I should have executed procedures taught since day one of form flying in the training command: Establish an altitude and heading difference. Instead, I tried to “hack it.” Following procedures would have prevented the close pass.

Finally, I unintentionally had violated NVG-training rules. These rules prohibit wearing NVGs while in instrument conditions. During the tanker rendezvous, I thought the NVGs were helping my situational awareness, but, in hindsight, I really think they caused most of my vertigo. The various rules that govern our flying are designed to prevent dangerous situations, and, had I obeyed those rules, this situation would have been avoided. With more than 2,500 flight hours and a three-year FRS tour behind me, I thought I had seen it all. A dark night, combined with challenging weather, taught me a lesson I never will forget. 🛩️

LCdr. Powers flies with VFA-37.