



Rushing to a Midair

By LCdr. Chris Bergen

Everyone I talk to has bad stories about visiting the “Iron Maiden” (aka the KC-135). We frequently receive lectures and discuss techniques about getting into its unique metal basket. When it was our turn to visit the big-wing tanker, the evolution

didn't go according to plan. We had a nighttime flight during late spring work-

ups in an area off the Virginia coast. My pilot was a Cat. I nugget, who had been on my crew since his arrival in the squadron. I was a salty lieutenant with a set of work-ups and one deployment under my G-suit. We were comfortable with each other's habit patterns, and we meshed well as a crew. I enjoyed flying with him.

Our mission was to get night current on the KC-135, and we were scheduled for the last recovery of the evening—a benign mission when you get down to it. Perhaps our complacency would bite us in the end. A quick



review of the airplan showed two sections of FA-18s also would be tanking. We talked about the FA-18s because they had air-to-air radar and would beat us to the tanker, so we planned to be last in the basket. Our NATOPS and mission brief covered all the standard items, and we reviewed radio calls and procedures to expeditiously get into the basket.

Our night Case III departure was uneventful, and, with a few steers from strike toward the tanker, we thought we were set. Working 1,000 feet below the tanker's briefed altitude, we had our air-to-air TACAN set to receive DME, which counted down as we neared the rendezvous point. Then, the DME went up, so we turned around, and the DME went back down. This pattern continued for about 15 minutes. Our backseaters tuned up the boom freq, and we could hear the last Hornet completing his plug.

When we were confident the Hornets had departed, I asked the tanker to call his position off mom. He replied with his radial and DME and asked if we wanted him to remain "midnight." The lights might have been off on the tanker, but they all were turned on in our cockpit. The two sections of Hornets had tanked on goggles, which explained why we (not on goggles)

couldn't find anyone. After replying negatively to the "midnight" query, the tanker turned on everything, and, lo and behold, there she was, about five miles away.

Now we were rushing. The departure, the aborted rendezvous, and the impending Case III recovery put us in a time crunch. We quickly joined up and set up to plug. Instead of focusing on the task at hand, we realized we would be late for our recovery.

After calling, "Complete, thanks for the work," I looked down at the radio-control panel to change back to strike freq. When I looked up, I didn't see the tanker disappearing out the left side of the windshield, but I saw an up-close and personal view of the two starboard engines. Instead of disengaging, drifting back, and then clearing to the right, we got out of the basket and immediately turned right.

I emphatically called, "Move it right" to my pilot, who replied calmly, "I am."

I looked down to see full-right stick deflection, and our plane waffled in an uncomfortably close position to the KC-135. Finally, putting out the speed brakes and using a little cross control got us out of the vortex of the starboard wing, and we descended clear. The approach and recovery were uneventful and unusually quiet, as we dwelled on the near-midair collision.

What we did wrong is evident. We didn't talk in the brief about establishing adequate fore and aft separation prior to lateral separation. What actually put us in this near-disastrous situation? We were complacent; it was just a "benign" flight, right? We also imposed perceived pressure on ourselves and rushed the evolution. We were worried about getting to the marshal stack on time. In hindsight, was that so important? Being on time didn't seem so important after we had cleared the KC-135.

What did we do right? Not much. Some outstanding piloting by my single-anchor crew member saved our lives. I learned once again that complacency can kill you, or at least raise its ugly head to let you know it's out there trying to. Don't rush the important things—rushing also can kill you. Always remember to focus on the task at hand. 

LCdr. Bergen flies with VAQ-139.