



Tanking, Mediterranean Style

by Lt. Mike Garrick

It was my first fleet hop, and I was headed into combat. I had just joined the Garudas, who were deployed to Aviano, Italy, in support of Operation Allied Force. We were on for a morning “kill box” mission. The plan was for two sections to fly to the tanker-track, gas up, and then orbit around Kosovo. The four- or five-hour mission meant we were sure to see the tanker more than once.

The XO, who was to be my lead, thoroughly briefed the flight. It looked like we were going to have a KC-135, although a British L-1011 was also noted on the tanker plan. I wasn't qualified behind the “Iron Maiden,” but I was sure this fact hadn't been overlooked. I reasoned that we only needed three Prowlers to complete the mission, so if I couldn't tank, it wouldn't mean NATO was going to lose the air war. I had talked to other pilots about the 135, both in Aviano and back at Whidbey, and the XO gave me some more parenthood on the subject when we broke up to brief the sections. I felt prepared and was confident it was going to be a good flight.

We launched on time. The rendezvous went remarkably well, considering I hadn't flown form in more than a month. We climbed to 20,000 feet, and I loosened up the section. The winds at altitude were light, so we didn't get the

tailwind we had hoped for. The trip down the Adriatic took a bit longer than expected.

At long last, we made radio contact with the tanker. I started to mentally switch myself back on for the joinup and tanking. Once we saw the KC-135, the XO made the rendezvous while I held on. We joined on the right side for a right-to-left (NATO rules) flow. The XO was cleared in first.

From my vantagepoint, the Maiden certainly looked manageable. I was next. ECMO 1 assured me that we had plenty of time to get on station, and we had the tanker all to ourselves. I stabilized in pre-contact and got the go-ahead to engage. I started my approach, trying to keep the closure under control. About halfway to the basket, I asked ECMO 1 how it looked.

“Good, keep it coming,” he replied. I had prepared myself for the possibility that I would have to take several stabs, so I was pleasantly surprised to see the probe engage the basket.

A split second later, my bubble burst when I saw the boom begin to disappear behind the glare shield. Knowing that, above all else, I didn't want to be high, I compensated down, and it was too much. I knew I was beginning to oscillate and heard, “Look at the big airplane,” from the right seat.



Photo-composite by Allan Amen

Then I heard, “Back it off.”

I pulled power and pushed the nose down to preserve the radome from the hose’s imminent snapback. I also unconsciously banked to the right, to avoid the boom. We made it out of the basket, but the backseaters saw the tip of the probe pass over their heads on its way down to the Adriatic.

ECMO 1 called, “We’re done,” explaining what had happened. We were a couple hundred pounds over our bingo to Aviano, so we declined the tanker’s request that we inspect the basket and started heading home. My SA balloon had completely deflated, and I had ceased to be an effective member of the crew. All I knew was that we were heading home, and it was because I hadn’t been up to the task of tanking.

Fortunately for us all, ECMO 1 was thinking for me, because the winds had picked up and were in our face. We might have made it home, but it would have been close. He made the call, and we turned toward Brindisi, the closest divert. He asked for a straight-in approach to the field, and I did a less-than-perfect approach.

On deck we got some gas and did a walk-around of the jet. We didn’t see it then, but the probe tip had hit the vertical stab when it fell off the aircraft. Our Prowler looked flyable, so

we decided to press back home. The breather had allowed me to clear my head, and the return flight was uneventful.

A couple points came out of this flight. First, the mission was accomplished. The squadron had been flying over Kosovo for a couple months already and had been there since the start of the air strikes. They knew they could flex to three Prowlers and still cover the vulnerability window. For my part, I was as prepared as possible for the Iron Maiden. It’s just something that you have to experience to learn how to fly. We had had plenty of time at the tanker track, so I probably should have flown form behind the basket for a while to get a better feel for the sight picture. Doing so would have kept the tanker from disappearing over my head. It is a technique I tried on my next stab at the KC-135 over eastern Washington, and it helped.

Finally, after the incident, I should have kept my wits about me and concentrated on getting us home. We had moved quickly from one phase of flight into another, and I couldn’t switch gears. Rather than contributing to the decision-making process, I had become a voice-actuated autopilot. 

Lt. Garrick flies with VAQ-134.